

17 Colorado Canyon City

BEADLE'S

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A CRY WENT UP FROM THE CROWD: "COLORADO KATE."

OR,
The Mayor of Canyon City.

A TALE OF THE MINES.

BY PHILIP S. WARNE,
AUTHOR OF THE "TIGER DICK" AND "PATENT-
LEATHER JO" SERIES, "LITTLE SHOO-
FLY," "LITTLE AH-SIN," "LITTLE
LEATHER BREECHES," "LIT-
TLE TORNADO," ETC.

CHAPTER I.

A REJECTED LOVER.

THE scene was a wild mountain gorge in the
Colorado Rockies.

The characters were a wizened little man,
with a shrunken body and a "game" leg, in the

rough dress of the mines, and a girl of rare beauty, of the style humorously called "strawberry blonde."

"So you're proposin' to marry Little Jingo?" said the man, with a moody frown.

But this may have been his ordinary manner; for the girl answered gayly, with a mock courtesy:

"If you have no objections, sir!"

"Waal, I have objections!"

"You don't say!"—with a lifting of the brows.

"Now, if this ain't too funny for anything! Ha! ha! ha!"

"Look out, Colorado Kate!"

The cripple's face had suddenly become livid with rage. His menace was a savage snarl, hissed through set teeth.

At which the girl's eyes flashed, and her voice rung with defiant resentment. She began to realize that the man was in earnest.

"And what shall I look out for, pray?"

"For the demon of hate your mockery can rouse!"

"Well, sir! if you will attend strictly to your own affairs—"

"I am attending to my own affair."

"Excuse me, if I fail to see it!"

"Do you mean to say—"

"I don't mean to say *anything* more to you! Nor shall I listen longer to what I find as uninteresting as it is insolent!"

How that sudden drawing erect of the figure, that flash of the eye, that vivid color in the cheeks, became her!

The man's swarthy face turned livid, and into his little eyes sprung a wolfish greed.

"Stop!" he fairly hissed between his teeth, throwing himself before her, as she attempted to sweep by him.

"Stand aside, and let me pass! Do you dare—"

"Have a care, Kate!—have a care!"

"Oh! I'm not afraid of you, Dick Mosier! You needn't make eyes at me with any such notion as that!"

"God forbid that you should be afraid of me!" aspired the man, struggling with his passion.

"Come! I'm tired of this sort of thing! Get out of my path!"

"You won't git shut o' me till ye hyear what I've got to say!"

"You'll have to be quick about it, then. What have you to say?"

"Only that I love you—that I have loved you all along!"

The man fairly choked as he uttered the words, so deeply was he moved.

"You!—you!" cried the girl, with unutterable scorn.

She stared at him in astonishment, and then, on a sudden, burst into a shriek of laughter.

The man looked at her, dumb, panting, his fingers working spasmodically.

"You?" she cried again, running her eye over his figure with such a glance as could come only from a woman's eye. "You love me!"

"And why not?" asked her victim. "Am I not a man? Haven't I eyes in my head to see you? Am I the only one who has ever loved you?"

"I should hope not!" cried the girl, with an intonation that cut like a knife. "I'd go hang myself, if you were!"

The object of her scorn could not reply. It seemed as if he were suffocating. He kept swallowing a lump that remained fixed in his throat.

"They say that half a loaf is better than none," continued the girl; "but, if you please, half a man isn't enough for me! Besides, the man that I call my lord and master must stand straighter in his shoes, and be better put together than you are, by a long chalk! What! do you suppose I'd let such a wizen little whiffet as you order me through life? And just listen to your voice! I'm fond of music, I am, but not of that kind!"

It was the mercilessness of an angry woman. How dared such a creature declare his love for her?

"That's it!" he cried, grinding his teeth in fury. "It's this accursed body! All hell must have been raked to find its pattern! But do you think that my soul is not like other men's? Do you fancy that beauty, seen through my eyes, becomes ugliness; or that, being still beautiful, I do not desire it with the same passionate longing that your Adonis might feel?"

"Maybe so! But the trick is to get the beauty to return the compliment! Fancy any woman going love-sick with longing for you!"

The sufferer fairly writhed under her contemptuous glance.

All his life he had endured the thoughtless, rather than ill-natured, gibes of men. He had

answered to the name of Limpy, until it no longer fanned into a blaze the dull embers of general hate with which he regarded all of his kind.

But never had he been made to suffer as now, when the woman toward whom his whole soul had gone out, with the fierce craving of a wretch starved in the midst of abundance, lashed him with the scourge of her unsparing tongue.

"Talk about your soul!" she cried. "Why, it is as ugly as your body! See what a sour, snarling wretch you are. You never see any good in anybody or anything. Aren't you always picking flaws? No matter what is said or unsaid, you never fail to hint at some evil back of it. No wonder that every living thing hates the sight of you. Don't the very dogs bark at you?"

He looked as if he with difficulty restrained the impulse to spring upon and rend her with his nails and teeth.

"If I have the soul of a devil, it is such as you that have made it so!" he cried, champing his jaws until he foamed at the mouth. "But do you think that I will be so spurned without striking back? Am I a stock or a stone, that I cannot feel; and feeling, hate; and hating, revenge?"

Before she could reply, the canyon re-echoed with a long-drawn musical:

"Hu-a-lou-ee!"

Colorado Kate's face brightened at once.

Dick Mosier ground his teeth with a rasping snarl like that of a wild beast.

"Listen!" he cried, raising his clinched fist, and shaking it in the direction from whence the sound came. "I swear that he shall never have you!"

"Bah! You see if he don't!" cried the girl, with a gleeful laugh.

Then her manner suddenly changed.

"Look here, Dick Mosier!" she said sternly, "if you hadn't been drinking, I'd call Little Jingo here, and have him thrash you within an inch of your life! Come! trot along, and don't keep me waiting! I've got the prospect of better company than yours! And now, take my advice. Go and put your head to soak, and then lie down in the shade somewhere, and cool off!"

"Katie did, she did! Oh, Kate!" cried a clear barytone voice down the canyon.

Without another word Dick Mosier hurried off.

And now, as she looked after him, and noted the cruel halt in his gait, the girl's face softened, and she said, pityingly:

"It's a shame, after all! He can't help his ugliness, and it must be hard to bear. What if Charley were to laugh at me for loving him?"

And her face blanched at the mere thought.

But, with the voice of the man she loved ringing in her ears, it was not likely that she would give much time to pitying one whose misery was as uninteresting as Dick Mosier's.

Raising her voice in its sweet, bell-like soprano, she awoke the echoes of the canyon with a succession of musical notes, and then, in the spirit of playfulness, ran and hid herself behind a boulder.

CHAPTER II.

THE SHADOW OF SUSPICION.

SOON a man with an expectant smile on his lips and an eager light in his eyes made his appearance, coming up the canyon with quick, agile leaps.

He was rather short in stature, but very compactly built, so as to combine activity with strength.

He was not the Adonis that Dick Mosier had compared him to, by any means; since his short, crisp, curly hair was of a fiery red. But one glance into his frank, good-natured face—into his clear, honest eyes—and all defects of comeliness were forgotten.

The man—or woman—who didn't like Little Jingo, had something the matter inside; their heart wasn't in the right place!

"Where are you, you vixen?" he cried, playfully.

And guessing that she was hiding from him, he glanced hither and thither as he advanced.

So close and still she crouched, that he had passed her without discovery when her merry laugh broke out.

"Well, if I hadn't sharper eyes than that!" she cried, tauntingly. "You can't care much!"

"I'll show you whether I care, directly I get hold of you!" he replied, springing toward her.

With a scream, she set off at a run; but he overtook and caught her in his arms.

"Now for it!" he cried, exultantly.

"Don't you dare, sir!" she commanded; "or I'll box your ears!"

And writhing round in his grasp, she administered the punishment in advance, no doubt taking it for granted that he *would* dare.

And he did!

"A kiss for a blow!—that's the good rule!"

And he kissed her until her cheeks were as rosy as fall pippins!—until her bonnet fell off, and her hair tumbled down about her shoulders in rich auburn profusion.

In the midst of her fierce struggles, she suddenly yielded herself to him, clasping him about the neck, and gazing into his eyes with delight.

This sort of love-making, if it lacked the delicacy of more refined life, was unmistakably genuine.

If Charley's ears rung, he knew that it was with a love-tap; and if Kate's cheeks burned where he had "bearded" her, she knew that he would have died to spare her serious pain.

"Who have you been skylarking up here with all alone?" he asked, looking about expectantly.

There was not a trace of jealousy in tone or manner. He trusted her so completely that it was all right, whoever it was.

"I skylarking?" she asked, bending her head, perhaps only to rearrange her hair, perhaps to hide the additional glow that came into her cheeks.

She hated to deceive him, yet she could not think of annoying him with a repetition of Dick Mosier's bluster.

"Yes," he answered. "Didn't I hear you talking to some one?"

"Well, when I haven't any one better to talk to, I sometimes talk to myself," she said.

"That's a woman's privilege."

"But do you blow yourself up? I couldn't hear what you said; but your voice came to me now and then; and I thought you were having a regular hair-pulling up here all by yourself!" laughed unsuspecting Charley.

"The idea! Well, I don't think you are particularly complimentary!"

And she turned sharply away, in mock resentment.

"You ain't mad, Kate?" he asked, going close to her side, and peering into her face.

"No," she answered over her shoulder, as she coiled the masses of auburn hair in a knot at the back of her head. "I'm only getting so old that I scold to myself!"

"The idea of your getting old—of your ever getting old!" he cried, with a glow of admiration of her youth and freshness.

And he bent to kiss her again.

But there was a hair-pin in her mouth; and, laughing at his discomfiture, she bit on it so as to make it stick straight out at him.

So the thought that she had been with some one passed out of his mind.

The time was to come when he would recall it, with a bitter feeling that she had evaded him.

He proposed that they continue up the canyon; but she urged a return to the camp. She did not wish to go in the direction Dick Mosier had taken, with the chance of coming upon him in his bitter mood.

Little Jingo, who found his greatest happiness in yielding implicitly to her sweet will, was as ready to turn back as to go forward.

They had scarcely got out from among the crags into the mountain road, when they discovered a man going on before them.

His dress was so peculiar that his identity could not be mistaken by any one who knew him.

He wore a long cloak and a high, sugar-loaf hat. His clothes were black, and his straight black hair fell down over his shoulders.

His movements were quick, even agitated, as if he were hurrying away.

"Hallo! there's the Undertaker!" said Little Jingo, calling his pard by the name he had been dubbed with by the boys, on his first coming to Canyon City.

And he called to him:

"Ho, pard! pull up a bit thar!"

Without looking round, the Undertaker turned off the road, and disappeared from view.

"What a queer fellow your pard is, Charley," observed Kate.

"As odd as Dick's hat-band!" admitted Little Jingo. "But he's a prime one to tie to!"

"I've no fault to find with him, since the day he saved your life," said Kate, with a glance of grateful tenderness into her lover's eyes.

A little later she asked:

"Are you going to have him live with us, Charley?"

"Do you want him?" asked Little Jingo, with an anxious glance into her face.

"I don't want my coming to make any difference, if you want him—as I suppose you do."

"I don't want him if you have anything ag'in' it, Kate."

"But I haven't. Didn't I tell you that I liked him for saving you?"

"That's good of you, my girl."

He did not connect the appearance of the Undertaker, and his seeming avoidance of them, with his previous idea that Kate had been not alone; nor did he attach any particular importance to the turn the conversation had taken—not just then. But our thoughts are demons that lurk in hiding, to spring forth when they can rend our hearts, with no good angel by to neutralize the poison of their dark hints.

CHAPTER III.

THE NIGHT-PROWLERS.

To Dick Mosier the answering signals of this lovers' hide and seek were gall and wormwood. He fled with his fingers in his ears.

Instead of returning to the camp, he plunged into the wildest passes that came in his way, seeking in nature's devastation some harmony with his disordered thoughts.

"It is always so!" he growled. "All the luck falls to him, and all the hard knocks to me! I may dig and slave from year's end to year's end on grub-stakes, while he clears a fortune in a night, with nothing to do but put money down and pick it up again. And now, the one thing that I have really wanted all my life!—the one thing that I would serve God or the devil to get!—he has but to come into camp and say the word and he robs me of her!"

In a frenzy of pain at his disappointment, he burst into furious execrations, until the rocks answered back in blood-curdling curses and howls of rage.

Whither he went, he could not have told. How narrowly he escaped death among the crags and precipices, he never knew. At last, torn and exhausted, he sunk down, and half-swooned into a profound sleep.

He woke, roused by the sound of voices and stumbling footsteps.

He saw that it was night. He realized that he was somewhere in the mountain fastnesses where men would not be likely to come at such an hour with honest purposes.

His native craftiness prompted him to lie still, on the alert to pick up some knowledge which he might turn to his private advantage.

He saw that he was lying in the dense shadow of a scrubby pine tree, beside a mountain-path flooded with the moonlight.

Up this path toiled two men.

By simply turning his head to one side, Dick Mosier could see them; and as the moonlight fell upon the face of one of them, the watcher had to stifle an ejaculation of surprise.

"The Squire!" he thought—"and with as hard-looking a tough as ever held up a coach in a mountain road."

The man referred to as the Squire was plainly of higher type than the ordinary miner. His clothes were of better material and better cut.

He wore top-boots of grain leather, trousers of corduroy, a stout Norfolk jacket, and a broad-brimmed slouch hat with a jaunty set.

A brace of highly-finished revolvers and a bowie-knife were held at his waist by a broad leathern belt, with a square metallic buckle in front.

He wore a mustache and long chin whiskers, which, with his erect bearing, gave him a commanding aspect.

But, familiar with all this, what particularly struck Limpy Dick was the fact that the Squire was blindfold.

"Is there much more of this sort of thing?" asked the Squire, as they came opposite the spot where Dick lay.

"We go to the top o' the house, to git away from eavesdroppin' neighbors!" laughed his companion.

"I don't wonder—with your peculiar business!"

"Or yours, Cap!"

The reply was made jestingly; but it came quick and sharp, as if the speaker repelled a slur with:

"You're another!"

The Squire laughed low, as if not displeased by the other's independence.

"Suppose we call it quits?" he suggested.

"I'm agreeable," replied the other.

Then they went on in silence.

"There's something in that!" said Dick Mosier to himself. "I'll take it in, whatever it is!"

And creeping from his covert, he stole after the prowlers of the night.

At a point where the path, with a precipice on the one hand and a cliff on the other, was so narrow as to admit of the passage of but one

person at a time, a dark figure suddenly rose and confronted the wayfarers.

"Who goes there?" demanded a gruff voice.

"The King of the Mountains!" was the reply.

"Whar does he hail from?"

"The land of the Philistines."

"Whar is he bound?"

"To the New Jerusalem."

"What does he bring?"

"Spoil of the enemy."

"Advance an' give the countersign."

This nonsensical formula was gone through gravely. It may have been only designed to work on the imaginations of ignorant men. It may have been of use to enable the sentinel to hear the voice of the person presenting himself for admittance, with the chance of so recognizing him before allowing him to get near enough for a treacherous blow.

He who had acted as guide to the Squire, advanced and whispered something in the ear of the guard.

"You're all right, Andy. I know your breath!" laughed the sentinel, as he drew back to allow the new-comers to pass.

"Cheese it, cully! before I knock the breath out o' you, so's you'll have somethin' else to know me by."

Andy spoke not ill-naturedly, but in the tone of rough banter common to men of his class.

"Who've ye got hyar?" asked the guard, unable to make out the appearance of the Squire in the darkness which just then prevailed, a cloud having passed before the moon.

"None o' yer blanked business!" retorted Andy, as pleasantly as before.

"You fling a sassy jaw!"

"You bet I do! An' I git paid fur it, too!"

"You light out, an' leave me in better company!"

"I'm goin' to better than I leave behind! Ta-ta!"

And so the chaff ended.

Skulking without, Dick Mosier dared advance no further.

"I wish I could drop that galoot over the cliff!" he muttered to himself.

But the chances were all the other way; so he stopped to consider some better method.

"Thar ain't no gittin' by that point without a hole in my skin," he reflected. "But I've got onto one thing. This hyar is whar Big-fisted Frank's gang hangs out. An' the Squire's in with 'em, hand an' glove—that's plain. But he didn't know the way; an' that proves that he ain't one of 'em reg'lar. What's he up to, I'd like to know? He's jest the rooster I'd like to drop on. He's got the gall of a goverment mule; but, better than that, he's got the rocks."

But the barrier which shut Dick Mosier out from the outlaws' stronghold need be no obstruction to the reader. Let us see what call the Squire had in such a place at such a time.

Once fairly within the stronghold, Andy said: "Now, sir, I'll take that handkerchief, if you're through with it."

"By all means, if you are consulting my convenience!" replied the Squire.

And he stripped the bandage from his eyes, with more eagerness than he allowed his manner to betray.

CHAPTER IV.

A SNAP SHOT.

THE Squire glanced about him with a keen, quick flash of the eye which allowed nothing to escape it.

Their rugged climb had brought them to a retreat shut in by crags on every side, and densely shaded by pines.

Here were a lot of cone-shaped huts, built of pine boughs, so closely resembling the trees as to be indistinguishable from them at a little distance.

Some of them were occupied as stables, for a lot of horses in excellent condition. From others came the sonorous snoring of men who, active while awake, slept "like logs."

No camp-fire betrayed the secret of this retreat. All was dark and still.

"Hallo, Cap! Rout out hyar!" cried the guide, Andy, as he thrust aside the blanket which curtained the doorway to one of the huts.

"I've brung ye an airy caller."

"Did you reckon you'd ketch me nappin'?" asked a quiet voice within. "Come in without makin' such a row."

"By Judas! I don't b'lieve nobody ever did ketch you nappin'!" declared Andy, as he stood aside to allow the Squire to precede him. "Don't you never sleep none, Cap?"

"Not in business hours."

"Business hours! Do you call two o'clock in the mornin' business hours?"

"If thar's any business to be done at that hour. I allow the gent as you've piloted hyar hain't come fur recreation."

By this time the Squire stood within the hut.

He found there a man seated on a candle-box set on end, with his back against the wall, smoking meditatively in the dim light of a waning fire built in the center of the inclosure.

Now a flickering flame would shoot up and illuminate his features, and a moment later it would go out, leaving only his figure dimly outlined in the glow of the embers.

Seen in this way, the solitary smoker was peculiarly repellent.

He had a round bullet head, with close-cropped hair, and whiskers of two weeks' growth bristled all over his face. His features were coarse and heavy, the massive jaw and little eyes indicating bull-dog resolution and implacable cruelty.

Without changing his position in the least, or in any way intimating a welcome to his guest, he looked up at him with a cool, inquiring glance which made his reply to Andy an interrogation addressed to the Squire.

"You may depend upon that," said the Squire, answering the look.

As cool as his churlish entertainer, he took the first seat at hand, and poked the loose-lying fagots together so as to make them blaze up.

Andy, who had stopped in the doorway, holding up the blanket so that he could look in, grinned as he observed this.

"Fur double-distilled gall," he reflected, "the Cap's got his match!"

"You're cold," observed the captain of the outlaws, with a covert sneer.

"On the contrary," replied the Squire, placidly, "I am rather warm with my climb."

"H'm!" grunted the road-agent chief, returning his pipe to his mouth.

He merely glanced at the door, not a line of his face altering.

Andy took the hint. His continued presence was not particularly desired.

He dropped the blanket, and made a great show of leaving the vicinity of the hut, tramping noisily away.

But at a little distance he stopped.

"By Judas!" he exclaimed, "that thar chin-nin' will be jest sweet to hear! Reckon yours truly will take it in."

He glanced about him warily.

Not an object was stirring. All was still save the snoring of the sleepers.

"But it won't be healthy fur to have anybody drop onto the young man a-layin' on his belly with his ear to that thar hut, you bet!" he mused.

And by way of further precaution, he tiptoed from hut to hut, and assured himself that he was indeed free from observation.

"Safe an' snug! It's risky, but hyar goes!"

And he stole back to the hut where he had left the captain and his guest to their midnight interview.

As the quickening flame filled the hut with light, the Squire turned and looked his host full in the face.

"I like to see the man I'm bargaining with. That's why I stirred the fire," he said pointedly.

"It's your privilege," answered the captain, unmoved. "I hope you find me as good-lookin' as you expected."

"You look as if you'd suit my purpose; and that's all I care for. How do you like my looks?"

The outlaw smoked on coolly, as he affected to glance over the person of his visitor; and then, without taking the trouble to remove his pipe from his mouth, answered:

"Fair."

The Squire smiled in spite of himself.

"I like your insolence, I do!" he said, frankly.

"Hang your likes or your dislikes! They're nothin' to me! I'm waitin' to talk business; an' that's what's the matter with me!"

The Squire drew a revolver from his belt.

"Cheese it, stranger!" cautioned Big-fisted Frank.

Instead of raising his voice, as men do with excitement, he dropped it to a deep base.

It was the cold, deadly menace of a man to whom murder was merely a question of the humor of the moment.

There was only the slight movement of one hand; but the Squire saw that a weapon was trained upon him—a self-cocking revolver.

"Put it up," he said, as coolly as the other.

"You're off your base!"

And looking in another direction, he lifted his weapon and fired through the wall of the hut.

There was a slight rustle without, and a low ejaculation, so quickly suppressed as to be scarcely audible.

Then all was as still as before.

The captain of the outlaws returned his revolver to his holster, remarking casually:

"I'll fix him in the mornin'."

The Squire put up his smoking weapon without comment on what he had done.

Outside, a man as pale as death was stealing away through the darkness.

"He's the devil, he is!" muttered the fugitive.

"It was him, fur sure. The Cap says 'Cheese it; an' he says 'Put 'er up.'"

So, partly by their words, and partly by their tones, Andy had read what was enacted within the hut.

But the pistol-shot had startled the sleepers as no other sound could. All through the camp, the loudest snorer leaped to his feet as quickly as any who prided himself on sleeping "with one eye open."

"This hyar's a mighty onhealthy section o' country, I'm thinkin'!" declared Andy. "Even ef the boys don't drop onto me to-night, the Cap will flax me in the mornin'. Reckon I'd better emigrate to a cooler climate! What a dog-gone fool I am, anyway! What did I want to dip my spoon into that chap's gruel fur?"

But from the various huts issued shadowy figures, each one a keen-visioned man with a cocked revolver in hand.

Andy had the wit to drop down in the shadow of the nearest hut, and lie snug and still.

"What's this hyar?" demanded a voice, gruffly.

"Blowed ef I know!" volunteered some one.

"Then it ain't your put-in," replied the first speaker. "Let them talk as has somethin' to say."

"I reckon they won't all speak to onc't, then!" growled he who had been rebuffed.

"It was a pistol-shot," ventured a third.

"Tell us somethin' we don't know, greeny!"

"Whar was it, an' who shot it, an' what did he shoot at? That's the question."

"Wa'n't it off in this hyar direction?"

"Nigh the Cap's wickiup?"

"I reckon."

The men drew together, but stood a little aloof from their leader's hut. They knew his churlish disposition, and that he was not likely to take it very good-naturedly to be needlessly roused from sleep.

"Shall we rout him out?" asked one, guardedly.

"Try it!" suggested another, dryly.

"You go hang! Try it yourself!" was the retort.

But the question was settled in a very summary manner.

From the hut came a string of profanity, followed by the injunction:

"Git back to roost, every son of a sea-cook, or I'll come out thar an' plant the hull raft o' ye!"

"Skin fur it, fellers! I allow the Cap knows what he's about."

"Blow me ef he hain't got one eye open, an' one ear, too, when thar's anythin' goin' on!"

And with various comments to similar purpose, in guarded tones, the men slouched back to their huts.

"That lets me out by the skin o' my teeth!" aspirated Andy, creeping from his place of hiding when the danger of detection was thus past.

"What did the Cap let up on me like that fur, I'd like to know? But it ain't fur good. Blast him! he don't never take that sort o' thing in without kickin'—not he! Ef I was fool enough to put my head in that thar sling, I'll be hanged ef I'm fool enough to keep it thar! No siree! I'm booked fur over the divide, I am!"

And stealing out of the camp, the unlucky Andy presented himself once more before the sentinel.

"Halt!" was the command, as peremptory as before.

"Cheese it, Dave! It's me," said Andy.

"Advance an' give the pass-word!" ordered Dave, with soldier-like formality.

"You're blamed pertickler!" growled Andy.

"It ain't ten minutes sense I passed you."

"I know my business!" retorted Dave. "Ef you was the Cap himself, you'd give the pass-word before you got by hyar; and don't you fur-git it!"

"Waal, ye needn't be so grouty about it!"

"You give the pass-word; an' you'll go through as slick as grease."

Andy advanced and whispered as before.

Dave sprung back, and presented his drawn revolver.

"What's the row?" asked the astonished Andy.

"You're under arrest!" declared Dave.

"The deuce ye say! I'd like to know why."

"Fur tryin' to pass the guard on a false countersign."

"A false countersign? Didn't that let me in ten minutes ago?"

"It let you in; but it don't let you out, my boy!"

Andy caught his breath.

"That's why the Cap took it so coolly," he thought. "He's got me penned in hyar, an' kin call to have me served up when he doggone pleases!"

CHAPTER V.

LIMPY DICK "TAKES A HAND."

It was a critical situation. Andy realized that it was an issue of life and death with him.

He was a quick-witted fellow, and his wits served him well this time.

He began to laugh, a low chuckle.

"You're as sharp as a brier, you air, Dave, old feller!" he said, in a most familiar tone. "I thought I'd ketch ye on that; but I see you're up. I wasn't goin' to give ye away—you know that. But I calculated to have the laugh on ye, between ourselves. But you've got me. I own up. Now I'll give ye the word; and we won't keep the Cap waitin' on our foolishness."

"I ought to take you in, an' that's a fact!" growled Dave, not at all pleased by the laying of such a trap for him, even in jest.

"You'd git me in jest one sweet scrape!" declared Andy.

He was trembling from head to foot, for fear that the sentinel would act in strict accordance with his duty, and march him back to headquarters. But he controlled his voice admirably.

No one, hearing his unconcerned chuckle, would have suspected his desperate suspense.

"I'll bet the Cap would tie me up by the thumbs!" he added, as if he had no fear that his friend would expose him to so severe a punishment for a harmless joke.

"It would sarve ye right!" growled Dave.

"But you're too tender-hearted to put me through like that," still laughed Andy.

"I ain't so sure that you would 'a' let me off," persisted Dave.

"Come! come!" said Andy, briskly. "I hain't got no time to stand hyar chinnin' with you! I bungled my errand, as it is. That's why I'm back so soon. An' you bet the Cap ain't in the best o' humors."

He advanced again, as if to give the password, taking it for granted that there would be no further opposition.

Dave was a good-natured fellow enough; so he let Andy off, with only the injunction:

"Don't you try on none o' your capers in the future."

He returned his revolver to its holster unsuspectingly. Andy's plausible manner had completely hoodwinked him.

What was his amazement, then, when he bent to receive the pass-word, to find himself seized by the throat!

He had scarcely time to realize that he was the victim of foul play, when he saw that he was on the verge of the precipice, being forced over!

The terror that thrilled through him gave him almost superhuman strength; and, grappling with his treacherous comrade, he began a life-and-death struggle, the end of which would not leave both of them on that ledge!

One lusty yell would sound the alarm, and bring assistance.

But Andy knew that as well as he did; and he clung to his throat with the grip of grim death!

"Curse you! what do you mean?" gasped Dave, in a hoarse whisper.

"I mean that it is death to either you or me!" replied Andy, in a low tone. "I hate to fix you, Dave—I do, so help me! when you let up on me, as you done. But thar wa'n't no other way. It was either you or me!"

He had some compunction of conscience, even in that moment of terrible suspense. He had sprung upon the unsuspecting sentinel with the fierce rapacity of an animal—or a man!—driven to bay; but now, as he saw his superior strength, together with the advantage he had set out with, overcoming the other, he felt the treachery of his deed. Then, too, he liked Dave, and would have spared him if it had been possible, consistent with his own safety.

The weakening man glared at his conqueror with protruding eyeballs. In that vise-like hug, and with that remorseless grip on his throat, his wildest struggles availed nothing. His knees gave way, and he felt himself sinking.

His face had turned black with strangulation, his mouth gaped, and his tongue lolled out.

"My God! I'll never get shut o' that look!" gasped Andy.

And he closed his eyes, as he lifted the body of his betrayed comrade, to cast it from him out over the abyss.

Meanwhile, this mad struggle had not been without a spectator.

Dick Mosier had been hanging about, racking his brain for some means of discovering what the Squire's business might be in such a place.

"I could strike him for rocks enough to set me fair an' square on my pins," he kept saying to himself. "That's what I want—a clean start once. Then I could hold my own with the best of 'em. But, hang it all! it's my luck to always be down before I'm up! I never have had a fair shake! But ef I kin git the Squire dead to rights on this hyar thing, all I've got to do is to say:—'Come down, old man! come down! You've got the sugar, an' it's me that's a-wantin' it. You may have your jig, an' all serene; but you've got to pay the fiddler! That's the way I'd strike him. An' ef I wouldn't make a sweet haul, my name ain't Dick Mosier!'"

But the thing was to get the Squire "dead to rights." As yet, he was not even sure that this was where Big-fisted Frank and his gang "hung out."

"I ain't springin' no mare's nest, ye understand!" he said to himself. "Wouldn't it be jest my luck to have him laugh in my face, an' tell me to go ahead with my rat-killin', an' be hanged?"

He ground his teeth and swore at the mere thought of having fate serve him such a scurvy trick.

In the midst of this scheming, Andy returned and sprung his treacherous assault upon luckless Dave.

"Eh! Blast his eyes! that's as dirty a trick as I ever see!" cried Dick.

But his first generous impulse to spring to the aid of the man so unfairly dealt with was strangled at its very birth.

"I'm a sweet one, I am!" he muttered. "Hyar them two is a-playin' to my hand, an' me a-growlin'! Dog eat dog! What is it to me? I've my own bacon to fry."

And he watched the struggle, creeping nearer and nearer, moved by no particular purpose, but only spurred on by that fierce excitement with which men, in common with wild beasts, witness a fight for life.

But suddenly a whole plan of action flashed upon his mind. He saw his object put within his grasp by one act of desperate wickedness.

He did not stop to reflect upon it.

"It's touch an' go!" he cried to himself. "An' he deserves it, blast him!"

With those words he lashed himself into a rage with Andy, so that he half-persuaded himself that he was doing a deed of righteous retribution.

As the traitor lifted his victim to cast him over the cliff, Dick sprung upon him, giving him a vigorous push.

With the man he had betrayed hugged in his arms, Andy was thus himself launched out over the abyss.

He turned his head with a horrified glance over his shoulder, and saw his murderer.

Then, without the utterance of a sound, he went down—down—out of sight!

Dick Mosier stood alone on the ledge with bated breath, trying to realize that he was a murderer.

He had been guilty of all sorts of crimes in thought. But until now he had never actually taken blood upon his hands.

On a sudden, the deathlike silence filled him with a wild panic, and turning, he fled the spot as if pursued by a legion of fiends.

So extreme was his excitement that he did not note the direction he was taking. It was chance that led him into the pocket instead of away from it.

This fact dawned upon him suddenly, and brought him to a dead halt.

He was warned of his vicinity to a camp of some sort by the floundering of a horse, which gained its feet and shook itself.

Then he heard the rhythmic snoring of a sodden sleeper.

"Blow me if I ain't in a reg'lar nest of hornets!" he mused, peering about warily. "It's the Big Fist's gang to a dead certainty! They'll make a bullet-pouch o' my skin, if they ketch me!"

But they were apparently sleeping in such perfect security that his courage revived as he listened.

"I may as well be sent to glory sizzlin' as to go on the way I have been doin'—passin' out by slow starvation!" he muttered. "I'll go one on

the Squire, now I'm hyar, an' ef I drop onto him, I'll live high fur one while!"

Limp Dick was a natural spy, and crept about much more noiselessly than Andy.

He was therefore able to discover the hut in which Big-fisted Frank and the Squire were holding consultation, without being himself detected.

"I've got him, an' he hanged to him!" he reflected exultantly, as he lay with his ear close to the wall of the hut and "took in" all that was said within.

Let us return to the interview interrupted by the shot at eavesdropping Andy, and learn what he overheard.

CHAPTER VI.

THE PLOTTERS.

"AND NOW," said the Squire, as the sounds of the outlaws retreating to their huts died away, "to the business that you are so keen after."

"Waal," replied Frank, "I've had you brung hyer to see how I'm fixed. Does it suit ye?"

"Yes," answered the Squire, promptly. "This will suit to a dot."

"I allow you've took it all in."

"At a glance. My guide was kind enough to allow me the use of my eyes after the sentinel was passed."

"Waal, now, what lay air you on?"

"Do you know the man that goes by the handle of the Undertaker, at Canyon City?"

"You bet I do! An' a mighty queer duck he is, too."

"That's nothing to the purpose. Stick to business, as you requested me to a moment ago."

"You've got me, boss! I own up. Drive ahead."

"Do you know just how he stands in Canyon City?"

"What d'ye mean?"

"Is he popular? Would the boys fight for him? Or would he have to hoe his own row, if he got into a scrape?"

"Waal, now, boss, I reckon you could find out more about that thar, ef you was to ask the boys themselves."

"It don't suit my convenience to ask the boys; so I ask you."

"An' you're payin' me to answer. That gives you the right. Waal, the time has been when the galoot as salted the Undertaker whar he lived would 'a' got a leather medal in Canyon City. But things has changed; and now I allow he'd have nigh as many backers as Everybody's Charley himself."

"Thar you have it, boss, as straight as a string an' as square as a die! Make the most on't!"

"Then the boys must be thrown off the track," observed the Squire, apparently as much to himself as to the man with whom he was conversing, as he gazed into the fire meditatively, with half-closed eyes.

The captain of the road-agents had no knowledge of the purposes of his guest; but he sat and smoked with stolid indifference while the other revolved his plans.

It was during this interval of dead silence between them that the fatal encounter between Andy and Dave occurred; and the perplexities of the situation engaged the Squire until Limpy Dick entered the stronghold.

At last he looked up.

"I reckon I'd better leave that to your ingenuity," he said. "Here's what I want done. Let's see how you propose to carry it out."

"For reasons that do not concern you, I want the Undertaker put out of the way, but so that it will not appear that he has been the victim of foul play."

"Quarrel with him, an' call him out, an' shoot him, like a man!"

Such was the Big Fist's short solution of the problem.

"Thank you!" said the Squire, dryly. "If that plan would have worked to my satisfaction I might have carried it out without taking the trouble to consult you."

"Suit yerself!" said Frank, indifferently.

"I mean to," retorted the Squire. "In the first place, I'm not a murderer."

"Ef it kin be helped," amended Frank. "No more am I."

"What do you mean?" demanded the Squire, feeling a covert insinuation in the other's manner.

"That you would drop your man if it come to the pinch," replied Frank, looking the other calmly in the eye.

"Be that as it may," answered the Squire, recovering himself, "it has not come to the pinch yet."

"You want the Undertaker spirited off, then?"

"Not that either, exactly. I want him to

leave this section of his own free will and accord. When I first proposed to come here, I thought to have him held as a prisoner; but since then I have concluded that that won't work. Now I propose that you drive him off in some way."

"We kin gobble him up, an' tell him that he has jest sixty minutes by the watch to slope."

"But if he rallies the men of Canyon City about him, and refuses to go? There must be no balk of that kind. I want him to get out quietly—without their knowing why he goes, or where, if possible."

"Pard," said the outlaw, removing his pipe, and leaning toward his companion, to make his speech more impressive, "I have a persuadin' way about me, ye onderstand. I reckon he'll git!"

After a little further maturing of their plot, the conversation diverged, the road-agent chief asking the Squire questions about members of the criminal class in Frisco, which developed the fact that the Squire was a rascal of the first order.

With this knowledge Dick Mosier thought it wise to content himself.

"They'll be breakin' up in a minute," he said to himself. "I've got all I want. I'll git!"

And he crept away as noiselessly as a shadow. A few minutes later Big-fisted Frank blew a whistle, as a summons to Andy.

Of course there was no response.

A substitute was roused, and the Squire given in charge to him.

He found the entrance unguarded, and gave the alarm.

The Big Fist came to the scene and looked the ground over, while his men stood at his back waiting his orders.

"H'm!" he grunted. "He had more pluck than I thought. He has tumbled Dave over the cliff, I reckon. We'll find him in the mornin'. Mount guard, hyar, Pete. An' the rest o' ye off to bed ag'in."

So coolly was the loss of a man disposed of.

Meanwhile Limpy Dick was hastening back to Canyon City.

"It'll be queer ef I don't make somethin' out o' this!" he reflected. "First, I'll strike that gay buck fur rocks. I've always wanted a banker; an' now I'll work him fur all he's worth. Then, they propose to sperl off the Undertaker, do they? H'm! h'm! I allow I'll make somethin' out o' that too!"

It was daybreak before he reached the camp; and once more he met Colorado Kate, up with the lark, and out among the cliffs, rambling fearlessly in quest of flowers, singing to herself as she went, and whistling and chirping to the birds.

He put on a shamefaced air, and said:

"I allow you'll be good enough not to lay it up ag'in me, what I said yesterday, nor let Little Jingo into the thing. I wasn't myself, you know that."

"You needn't borrow any trouble on that score," replied Kate, off-hand. "Do you think I would bother Charley with your nonsense? Not while I can take care of myself so well as I can against such fellows as you."

"I allow it's all right, an' your marryin' of him ain't none o' my funeral."

"You bet your life it ain't!" cried Kate, with a proud flash in her eyes.

And so they parted.

Dick looked back after her, as she went on unconcerned.

"You'll sing another tune from that, one o' these fine mornin's!" he growled between his teeth.

In the other part of his plot he resolved not to let the iron grow cold while he delayed.

The Squire was easily accessible, and he approached him at once.

"Boss," he said, assuming an air of insolent swagger, "I allow as I've got a leetle private business with you."

"Ah!" said the Squire, coolly. "Out with it, then."

"I said *private* business," insisted Dick.

The Squire was at once struck by the manner of the other.

"Such a whiffet wouldn't bluff me like this, unless he thought he had me somehow," he reflected.

His eyes closed slightly, and became furtively watchful; but otherwise his manner was unchanged, as he said, coolly:

"Private interests of your own, eh?"

"I reckon you'll think it will stand *you* in hand not to have it discussed too publicly," said Dick.

"Suppose we take a little ramble out of the camp, then," suggested the Squire.

"Excuse me, if you please," replied Dick.

"What's the matter?"

"You might take the notion to drop me over a cliff, by way of a silencer."

"Oh! is it so serious as that?"

"I ain't takin' no chances, thank you! You're a bigger man than me; an' with nobody by—Waal, I don't want to lead ye into temptation."

"Very well. Suit your own convenience."

"We'll stand out yan on the corner, if you're agreeable. Thar nobody kin hyear, while they kin see us."

With an unmoved exterior, though he saw that a crisis in his affairs was at hand, the Squire walked apart with the cripple.

"Well," he said, cheerfully, picking his teeth with a splint, "now let us have it, if you're ready. You'll find me an easy man to deal with if you take me fair and open."

CHAPTER VII.

DIAMOND CUT DIAMOND.

BUT this way of receiving his menace rather disconcerted Dick. He had thought to "sit down" on the Squire. But the unshaken self-confidence of the man made him conscious of his own weakness by contrast with this strength.

"But, by Judas! I've got the whip end!" he assured himself, and once more assumed a swagger.

"You'll find me to your taste, if openness is all you want," he said. "To come right down to business at the first jump, I've dropped to your leetle game ag'in the Undertaker!"

"Indeed?" replied the Squire, without a trace of surprise or disconcertion. "What do you know about it?"

"I know *all* about it!"

"Ah! Clever scheme, I flatter myself. What do you think?"

Dick's jaw dropped.

The Squire smiled pleasantly upon him.

"I think," he said, slowly, "that you're a mighty cool hand!"

"Nonsense!" replied the Squire. "It's simple enough. You don't understand me as well as I understand you. That's all."

"Waal, boss, suppose you show your hand?"

"Freely. I see, first, that you're a clever fellow—up to a certain point; secondly, that I can make you useful to me; thirdly, that money will buy you. In short, you have come to offer yourself to me for a price."

"What you have failed to perceive in me is, that I am the easiest man in the world to make terms with, if you bring anything to market that it is worth my while to buy."

"Now, then, suppose we get down to business. What have you to offer; and what is your price?"

This brisk way of meeting the emergency fairly took Dick's breath away.

"Hold on, boss!" he said, shuffling uneasily. "Jest give me a chance to straighten out my keerds."

"Take your time," said the Squire, indifferently. "There's only one thing I beg you to remember, and that is that I am here to talk business, and not nonsense. So you needn't put up any fancy prices on me."

Dick scratched his head and cleared his throat.

"Let me help you to straighten your story out," suggested the Squire. "How did you come to know anything about my plans?"

Dick felt that the tables had been turned upon him. Instead of dictating terms to a man who was half a suppliant at his feet, here he was being catechised like a schoolboy.

However, the stronger will swept him along with it; and he answered:

"I follered you into the Big Fist's roost."

"Did you, indeed?" cried the Squire, looking at him with new interest. "Well! you are a better man than I supposed. And you may be worth more to me than I had any idea. But if you follered me, as you say, and as is no doubt true, you know that I was blindfold."

"That's what's the matter!" replied Dick, plucking up courage, and beginning to feel less hostile toward the Squire.

It was rather flattering to be on terms of equality with such a man.

"Then *you* have the secret of the outlaws' retreat, and in so far have the advantage of me?"

And there was wondering admiration in the Squire's eyes.

"Right you air, boss!" declared Dick, feeling more and more satisfied with himself.

"Come! come!" cried the Squire, rubbing his hands. "We must go cahoots in this thing! I'd like nothing better than to get a ring in the nose of that cheeky road-agent."

"You've come to the right shop, then, Cap, to git it!" cried Dick.

"You'll let me into it?"

And the Squire grasped Dick's hand.

"If you'll make it worth my while," said Dick.

"If I don't, shoot me!" cried the Squire. "Look here! Was it you, then, that knocked that sentinel into Kingdom-come, over the cliff?"

And the Squire looked as if he was ready to find a hero in this wizen little fellow.

Dick shuddered.

"No!" he said. "I didn't do it."

"Who did, then?"

"The chap as led you up the mountain."

"My guide? And it was in leaving the pocket?"

"Yes. The sentinel halted him, an' was goin' to put him under arrest."

"But why?"

"Because he hadn't the pass-word."

The Squire laughed. He too, saw through the Big Fist's unconcern in leaving the eaves-dropper the freedom of the pocket.

"So he escaped, after all."

"No, he didn't. They both went over the cliff together."

And Dick described the contest, only taking the precaution to omit his own share in it, leaving the impression that he had taken advantage of the opportunity thus left open to him.

"Well," pursued the Squire, "now, what did you overhear?"

Dick detailed the conversation.

"You've got it all, and no mistake!" said the Squire, without annoyance or apprehension. "But we needn't fall out over it. You thought I would kick, didn't you—or that I would come down with hush-money, shaking in my shoes? Well, I do neither. But I say what I set out with—we can be of use to each other. You can put a bigger thing in my way than I can get without your help; and I can afford to divvy up, and be ahead still."

Dick's head was in a whirl, but he had a glimmering of prudence still.

"What air you up to, Cap?" he asked. "You want to let me into the whole thing, you know!"

"Oh, no!" replied the Squire, with a knowing shake of the head, "I'll let you into it just so far as we act together. Then you can't peach on me, and I can't squeal on you. That's even-handed."

And with this arrangement Dick was forced to rest content.

However, the Squire had the appearance of perfect frankness in everything but regarding his motives for getting the Undertaker out of the way.

He planned how he was to be shown the way to the robbers' retreat; then their interview with the chief; then their getting out of that section without giving the road-agents the chance to "come back at them."

On that very night they set out together. All went well until they reached the vicinity of the pocket. There the Squire was expressing his satisfaction, when they were suddenly set upon, and Dick found himself in the center of a group of grinning outlaws, with whom the Squire seemed to have a perfect understanding.

"Sold!" cried Dick, in despair.

"Completely!" acquiesced the Squire, pleasantly.

"An' doggone cheep, too!" added the Big Fist, with a menacing frown.

"But, if you knew the way hyar," cried Dick, "why did they blindfold you; and if you didn't why did these gents let me show you?"

The Squire laughed.

"I was sharp enough to outwit my guides," he said, "and to discover the way for myself. When I convinced the captain here that I knew, yet was not disposed to use my knowledge to his disadvantage, but was rather willing to play into his hands by passing you over to him, he accepted the situation like a sensible fellow; and here you are, having overreached yourself in trying to match wits with a man who could double-discount you, and give you points."

"Then you have put up this job since this mornin'?"

"Of course."

"An' I thought I watched you!" groaned Dick.

The Squire only laughed.

"An' now I'll try my hand!" said the Big Fist. Looking at him, Limpy Dick shook in his shoes!

CHAPTER VIII.

A TREACHEROUS LETTER.

"So, my fine feller," said the Big Fist, as he led Limpy into his stronghold, the Squire returning to Canyon City unopposed, "you have a knack fur playin' the spy! Resky business that, as many a smart feller has l'arned. D'ye know what comes o' spyin'?"

Dick shuddered. He feared that the Big Fist would not let him off with so easy a death as shooting.

"Mum!" said the outlaw. "You keep yer tongue fur use whar it will do the most good, you do! You'd give it more slack, now, ef some one was offerin' ye a stake to blow on me. Waal, I reckon I'll fix you so that ye won't raise to that bait so nimble!"

Dick walked with his head hanging on his breast.

"It's my accursed luck!" he kept saying to himself. "I might 'a' knowed it! Waal, this hyar's a finisher; an' I ain't over sorry, fur one!"

Later he learned that only one body had been found on the rocks below the precipice over which he had hurled two.

Dave lay there in ghastly mutilation; but it was supposed that he had fallen undermost, breaking the shock for his murderer, so that Andy had come off with whole bones, and made his escape.

For several days Limpy Dick was kept in the outlaws' stronghold, without any intimation as to what disposal was to be made of him.

"What'll Shep think has become o' me!" he asked himself, referring to his partner.

He was soon to learn that he was not the only one to whom this question had occurred.

Big-fisted Frank came to him and said:

"Now, my fine spy! I'm ready to put you through a course o' sprouts that'll show ye that thar's more'n one way to button up a man's lip fur him."

Dick blanched and looked his terror.

"Oh! you needn't git skeered before you're hurt," said Frank. "I never rub a man out when I think I kin make more out of 'im in another way."

"What air ye proposin' to do with me?" asked Dick.

"Make ye my secretary. You know how to write, don't ye?"

"Yes!" cried Dick, eagerly. "I kin shove as nasty a quill as ary man you'll scare up."

"You're mighty keen fur it!"

And Frank lay back and roared with laughter. Dick's heart misgave him.

"What trap have I walked into now?" he thought, with disgust at his want of caution. "I might 'a' knowed that that devil wouldn't let me off so easy."

Frank put pen, paper and ink before him.

"Thar's yer tools," he said. "Now shake yer coat an' wade in!"

"What shall I write?" asked Dick, faintly.

"What I tell ye to, blank yer eyes! Buckle down to it, now."

Dick dipped his pen in the ink, and waited in readiness.

"Date the thing at Bitter Forks."

Dick complied, writing in a fair, running hand, which showed that his self-recommendation had not been an empty boast.

"You'd make a good forger," observed Frank, as he scanned the performance critically. "Did you ever try your hand at that sort o' thing?"

Dick started, flushed, and began to make a denial.

"Don't tell it!" said Frank. "I hate to have a man lie when thar ain't no call fur it. I never had no sleight at quill-drivin'." I wish I had!

"What else?" asked Dick, to get off that rather delicate subject.

"Dear Shep," dictated Frank.

"Eh?"

Dick started.

"That's my pard's name."

"Of course it is."

"But am I to write to him?"

"Why not? Don't you fancy he'd like to hear what's become o' ye?"

The color faded from Limpy Dick's face. He could not guess what lay back of this; but he was suspicious of some evil plot.

"Curse ye!" shouted Frank, waxing suddenly furious, "why don't ye write what I tell ye to? Air we goin' to arguify what you do like an' what you don't like?"

Dick wrote "Dear Shep," tremulously.

"That's the ticket!" cried Frank, when he saw the effect of his anger. "You're a sick man, ye understand; an' o' course yer hand shakes."

"Now, I reckon you kin string this hyar off better than me. I never had the gift o' gab, no-

how. Jest you tell him that you've been out prospectin', an' that you've struck it richer'n cream. But tell him that you're down with the mountain fever, in Bitter Forks, an' ef he don't come on instanter, you're belike to die, an' carry the secret of your find to glory. Because why? Because you don't propose to let no livin' galoot into it but him. Jest you tell him that, an' put it strong."

"Say, look hyar, now," pursued Frank, changing the current of his theme abruptly. "You an' him has got a leetle cache of dust, that you scraped together before your claim thar petered out—hain't you, now?"

Dick admitted the fact.

"Waal; jest you tell him to tie that thar dust up in his clo's, as thar won't be no call fur to go back to Canyon City—which the same, you bet your sweet life, thar won't be no call fur him!"

"Air you goin' to have me rob my own pard?" asked Dick.

This was the most atrocious of all crimes.

"Say, pard," drawled Frank, "did you ever look straight into the place what the preachers tell about?"

And drawing a self-cocking revolver, he directed it so that Dick could gaze directly down the bore, while he slowly raised the hammer by contracting the finger that rested on the trigger.

If it passed a certain point it would be released to speed a bullet into his brain.

"Hold on!" gasped Dick, hastily preparing to write.

"S'pose we keep it hyar as a reminder?" suggested Frank. "It'll stir up your ideas."

And with that menace before him, Dick wrote. Frank read the letter with satisfaction.

"You did put it strong, an' that's a fact!" he chuckled. "I reckon you don't feel prepared to go up higher yet! Now this hyar letter is a-goin' to call your pard fur all he's worth; an' then I'll have further use for you!"

Dick shuddered. He feared worse behind that menace.

Frank looked him over with cruel eyes, and then went away chuckling.

What devilment was he hatching?

Dick was left to justify his treacherous act by pleading that he was forced to it under the threat of death. He had no thought of sacrificing himself rather than his pard.

CHAPTER IX.

HE "DOWNED" HIS PARD.

On the following day the outlaw chieftain presented himself once more before his trembling victim.

"Look a-hyar, my bantam!" he said, standing over him and glowering down at him like an ogre. "I'm proposin' to own you, body an' breeches. When I crack the whip, you've got to jump—an' jump the way I want ye to, too!"

"I'll do anything you say," quavered Dick.

"You bet you will! Now, then, hearken to what I say."

He then told the shivering wretch what he had laid out for him to do.

The scheme, which will be developed presently, left Limpy Dick ghastly pale and shuddering with horror.

"I can't do that, boss!" he pleaded. "Human nater won't stand it!"

"You can't eh?" asked the Big Fist. "So much the worse fur you."

And with a careless shrug of his shoulders, he walked away.

"I won't do that—not that!" Dick kept assuring himself.

But his heart was like water, and he knew it! When a horse was supplied to him, and he was ordered to fall in with the rest of the outlaws, he mounted, feeling that he was going to his soul's destruction.

A bolder man might have dreamed of escape. He was too cowardly to think of attempting it. Free as he was, a bullet could outstrip his fleeing horse.

They rode to a spot where the mountain road dipped down into a gloomy gorge, and bent at the same point—an ugly spot to meet gentlemen of the road in.

Here they waited in ambush until the rattle of a ramshackle vehicle announced the approach of the Overland Coach.

"Now, then, my beauty!" hissed the Big Fist into Dick's ear, "you win yer spurs, or *pst!*"

He made a significant motion with his thumb, to express that on failure the delinquent would "go up."

Limpy Dick still assured himself that he would not cover himself with the foulest infamy to save his life.

But as the coach rattled into the gorge, he felt the cold muzzle of a revolver touch his

temple; and spurring his horse into the road with a start, he cried:

"Halt! Throw up your hands!"

"Stuck!—fur rocks!" cried the driver.

He drew up his horses, and then sat staring open-mouthed at the manikin who had challenged him.

"Waal, blow me ef you ain't a sweet one to take to the road!" he declared. "A square-toed man could blow you away with one good whiff!"

This contemptuous fling enraged Dick, and woke in him a spirit more in keeping with the business on hand. Besides, the knowledge that he had a host of good men at his back encouraged him to play the tyrant.

"You'd had better try it yourself!" he cried, blusteringly. "Throw up your hands, I say! Up they go!"

And he brought his revolver to bear on the stage-driver in fair bandit style.

"Waal, this knocks me!" chuckled the driver.

And coiling the lines about the brake, he complied with the order.

But he looked at the road-agents and grinned, thinking that they had put this manikin forward as a joke.

Out from the sides of the coach were thrust the heads of the occupants.

Among the rest was that of Shep Lambert, the pard whom Dick's letter had summoned.

He looked back into the coach and said:

"It's no go, boys. Thar's enough of 'em to eat us up."

"It's shell out, then?" asked a fellow passenger.

"That's the cheapest way out of it."

"We might as well take the thing good-natured, then."

"Thar's no money in growlin'."

"Come! Tumble out o' that!" cried Dick, with a swagger.

"I'll sw'ar I've heard that voice before," said one of the men, looking inquiringly at Shep.

"So have I," he replied, with an odd, puzzled expression on his face.

They go out as ordered, and Shep fixed his eyes upon the challenging road-agent.

Dick, like his companions, wore a mask of black cloth.

For a man of ordinary build, this was a sufficient disguise; but Dick's unfortunate body was a mark of identity that could not be so easily covered up.

Shep Lambert turned pale as he recognized him, but he said nothing. Only he fixed his eyes upon him sternly.

That look sent a tremor through Limpy Dick's frame. He shivered to think what would be exacted of him in the next few minutes.

The conflict of emotion harassed him, and anger was born of a sense of helplessness.

"Git into line thar, an' throw up yer hands!" he shouted, roughly, avoiding Shep's eyes.

But he could not escape it. It haunted him, and he looked back in spite of himself.

The passengers, of whom there were two besides Shep, obeyed; though the growl of one of them showed that it was out of respect for Dick's backers more than himself.

"Air we goin' to be skinned by that leetle whelp?"

Shep Lambert said nothing; but his lips were compressed, and his eyes burned with kindling indignation.

Big-fisted Frank rode round behind the prisoners, and there sat with drawn revolver, his eyes fixed upon Dick's face, with a malicious grin hidden by his mask.

But he sat there an ever-present menace, which Dick could feel. He knew that if he faltered when the time came to act, this silent mentor would send a bullet crashing through his brain, with no scruples whatever.

The wretched manikin dismounted, and began to go through the pockets of the passengers.

Shep stood last in the line, and Dick's courage oozed out more and more completely, as the time drew near when he must face this victim of his enforced treachery.

When he came to him, he paused, and stood irresolute.

Then Shep broke his iron silence.

"Limpy Dick," he said, sternly, "dare you put your hands on me, after the letter you sent?"

Unseen by the men who stood with their backs to him, the Big Fist raised his revolver, covering Limpy Dick's face, and slowly drew on the trigger.

Dick glanced over Shep's shoulder at that slowly-lifting menace; and with a sudden burst of rage born of terror, he executed the task imposed upon him by that remorseless master.

With a furious oath he shouted:

"I'll show you whether I dare or not!"

And throwing up his weapon, he fired point blank at Shep's heart, at a distance of scarcely a yard!

As he realized his fate, Shep's jaw dropped. The horror of the thought of being shot down in cold blood by his own pard, after this treacherous inveiglement into a trap, was so great that he did not utter a sound, but only stared in dumb amazement.

Without so much as lowering his hands, he fell straight over backward, stone dead!

CHAPTER X.

IN THE TOILS.

LIMPY DICK had done what had been exacted of him. But he was overcome. The revolver dropped from his nerveless grasp, and he felt as if he were swooning.

With a yell, as if of astonishment, the Big Fist spurred to his side, menacing him with his revolver, and shouting, with a flood of profanity:

"What do you mean, you — — —? You'll have the Vigilantes down on us! Do you think I care for your squabbles with your pard? I'm runnin' this hyar thing on business principles, I want ye to know: an' I ain't droppin' no meat when thar ain't no call fur it. Blow me, ef I hain't a mind to plug you whar ye live!"

And much more to like effect.

Dick stood aghast. He saw the whole enormity of the Big Fist's revenge, and the hold he was determined to get upon him.

It would be useless ever to plead that he had been forced to the act by the threat of his life. Here were three men, the two passengers and the stage-driver, who would swear that he did it in a fit of anger, to the surprise and annoyance of his companions in crime.

"Jest as like as not we'll have to clear this hyar country, all fur you!" cried the Big Fist. "Blast ye! couldn't ye fight it out with your pard some other time, ef you'd been layin' up fur him?"

Dick was not fool enough to think of an attempt to set himself right in the eyes of the witnesses of his deed. He knew that to implicate the Big Fist, would be to court instant death.

"It's jest my infernal luck!" he groaned, and remained silent.

"I've a mind to tie you head and heels, and tumble you into that thar coach, and send you to Canyon City, fur the boys to fix you as they like, jest to show that I hadn't no hand in this hyar, an' it ain't my style. I'll bet my head thar ain't another man in my gang that would shoot his own pard!"

After raging round until he seemed exhausted, the Big Fist changed his tactics.

"Ef you wasn't a mighty good man, an' hadn't put so many soft things in my way, I'd shake ye, blow me ef I wouldn't! But money's what I want, an' maybe this hyar thing kin be hushed up."

He turned to the passengers and stage driver, who stood apparently greatly shocked and fearful of their own fate, and said:

"Now, look hyar, boys!—business is business; you tickle me an' I'll tickle you! You kin raise a thunderin' rumpus about my ears, ef so be you're a mind to. Then ag'in you kin keep yer mouths shut about this hyar thing, an' nobody need know jest how Shep Lambert passed in his checks."

"What ye say? Ef you'll sw'ar never to blow this thing until I give ye leave, I'll let you off; but ef you don't, I'll have to plug ye, to save my own bacon. I don't like that sort o' thing; but ef you force me to it, I'll take care o' number one, ef I have to clean out yer whole camp!"

"This hyar ain't none o' my funeral," said one of the passengers, uneasily.

"Good fur you!" was Big-fisted Frank's approval. "Ef everybody took such a sensible view o' things, thar wouldn't be so many broken bones in this hyar world."

"I allow as I hain't no call to set up my hide fur to be made a sieve of, jest so'st the boys kin know that this hyar dirty leetle whelp salted his pard," said the other, glancing contemptuously at Dick. "But it's my private opinion, publicly expressed, that *somebody* ought to string him up by the heels, an' leave him to dry! I've seen low-down jobs in my time; but fur onmitigated cussedness, this hyar takes the biscuit!"

"You're welcome to yer opinion, so long as you don't interfere," said the Big Fist, approvingly.

"I don't dip in when it ain't my say-so, pard."

"All right, then. That's all I want o' you. I've got to put this hyar chap back in Canyon

City—the only place whar he can earn his salt in my business—an' I don't want my market spoiled."

Then turning to the stage-driver, he asked:

"Waal, pard, what's the word with you?"

"I'd rather have a mouth an' not shoot it off, than to have no mouth to shoot off," said the philosophical jehu.

The outlaws laughed.

Big-fisted Frank then proceeded to administer the oath.

He made them swear by all the horrible things he could think of not to reveal what they had seen until he gave them permission.

"I'm killin' two birds with one stone," he explained. "I'll jest hold this hyar thing over you, my sweet pard!" he said to Dick; "an' ef you ever take it into your cunnin' head to cut up rusty on yours-truly, I give these hyar gents permission now fur to blow you sky-high on this thing! You know what you've got to look for—ard to, ef the boys at Canyon City—or anywhar else, fur that matter—git wind of it."

He then ordered the passengers back into the coach, and directed the driver to "pull out" and not look back.

But he did not let them go as they had come, for he placed Limpy Dick in the coach with them, saying:

"I'll want to see you back in Canyon City in two days!"

Now Dick was nobody's fool. He reflected on what had passed, and came to the conclusion that, from first to last, it was a "put-up job"—that his fellow-passengers and the driver were confederates of the Big Fist. But he could not be certain of this; and how, if it were true, could he make any one else believe it? They were all men who stood as well as any one else in the community.

"I'm fixed fur good an' all!" he said to himself. "It's that Squire! He's the devil! I put my foot in it, when I tried to buck ag'in him! Waal, bein' in, I might as well jump in all over, an' see if I can't make somethin' out of it, like the rest."

CHAPTER XI.

THE WHIP END.

ON his return to Canyon City the Squire met Limpy Dick with mock cordiality, asking what had become of his pard.

"He has slipped away so mysteriously," he said, "that the boys have it that he has hit upon some tremendous find."

Limpy Dick could not repress a shudder.

"Of course you're at the bottom of it all," he said, sullenly; "an' I know it's no use tryin' to shake you, now that you've got your hooks on me. But what more do you want with me?"

"I?" asked the Squire, with affected surprise. "What could I want with you? I have shut your mouth, and that satisfies me."

"Look hyer," said Dick. "I've been thinkin' this hyar thing over, an' I'll go my pile I see through it."

"Make no mistake," said the Squire, with a derisive smile.

"That's all right," replied Dick. "I thought I had you the last time. I see my mistake now."

"Do you fancy you have me any better now?"

"No; you bet I don't."

"Well, then, suppose we call it quits?"

"I ain't ready fur that neither. I was a fool to buck ag'in' you. Now I propose to work with you."

"Why, I thought we were working together before."

"After a fashion. But now I allow I kin help you do what *you* want to do, ef you will help me do what *I* want to do."

"Ah! you put such a good thing in my way last time, that you'll find me all the readier for a new enterprise."

Dick saw that the Squire was determined to laugh at him; but he stuck to his purpose.

"You want to run the Undertaker off so's nobody will drop to you?" he asked.

"There's no use in denying that," said the Squire, "since you overheard so much."

"Waal, hyar's the how to do it."

Dick then detailed his scheme, which will be developed as we go along.

The Squire listened at first with a mocking smile; but as he grasped the scheme he grew serious, then interested, and in the end delighted.

"Well, hang me if I have done you justice!" he cried, as Dick concluded. "You're a genius at this sort of thing! You've hit upon an idea that suits me better than anything I ever dreamed of. I had to trip you last time, because you had me dead to rights, and no mis-

take. But now there is every reason why we should work together on the square."

And the Squire grasped Dick's hand.

The latter was radiant, though the smile with which he greeted this turn in his fortunes made his face more hideous than when it was at rest.

From the depths of humiliation and despair, he was suddenly transported within sight of the heaven of his wildest hopes.

"Squire," he asked, with a piteous look, "this hyar is square?"

"As I have everything to gain and nothing to lose," said the Squire, frankly, "you may depend upon it. But when is this wedding that you tell about to come off?"

"In a week."

"A week?" said the Squire, reflectively. "Hm! That won't give me time to work up my little comedy."

Suddenly he brightened with a new idea.

"Oh, look here! I've hit it!"

And rapidly he detailed his scheme.

But in the midst of a delight which he could scarcely refrain from expressing by snapping his fingers and cutting a pigeon's wing while he laughed in glee, Dick was struck dumb with dismay.

"I say, Squire," he gasped, "this hyar won't do!"

"I'd like to know what's the reason it won't do!" cried the Squire, aggressively.

"Why," pleaded Dick, breathlessly, "I love the woman! I've never wanted anything so bad in all my life!"

"Well, won't you have her?" demanded the Squire, with heat.

"Have her!" repeated Dick, with blended astonishment and indignation. "But do you take me for a dog, that I'd want to have her in that way?"

"Oh, hang you!" cried the Squire, insolently. "What's that to me? It's what I want, my man! And if you have any doubts on that head, I'll teach you a lesson to which the one you've had is only A, B, C!"

Dick gazed upon the man, whose manner had so signally changed, in piteous helplessness.

"Boss," he said at last, with almost a sob in his voice, "you've got the whip end—"

"You bet your sweet soul I have!" interrupted the Squire, without a spark of compassion for the misery he was inflicting. "I *always* have! And, see here! If you ain't a fool, you will stop kicking! I've handled men that were the double of you; and I have yet to meet the one who is to get the best of me."

"But, pard, remember I put you up to this thing. Don't grind me in the dirt!"

The Squire turned white with suppressed rage at this persistent opposition; and dropping his voice to a low, fierce menace, he asked:

"Is this thing off?"

"No—no!" gasped Dick, humbly.

He shook from head to foot at the thought of losing the opportunity of even this qualified securing of his heart's desire.

"Well, then, let's say nothing more about it!" said the Squire, carelessly. "You do your part, and wait my motions."

"And, mind you!" was his parting menace, "if you see your chance, and spring this thing without me, I'll— Well, I'll leave it to your imagination!"

He could not have done better. Nothing could be more effective than that vague threat, coupled with the look he plunged into Dick's soul, as he left him.

He went away with his wonted bold, careless air.

Limpy Dick went his way, a crushed wretch.

They had been talking in the vicinity of an open shed, used to stable horses in. It was apparently unoccupied, and they were otherwise far enough away from any one not to be overheard.

But when they were gone, a bundle of loose hay which lay in a corner was agitated, and a man came cautiously forth.

It was by this time dusk, so that it was impossible to distinguish the fellow's appearance; but, issuing from his hiding place, he shook his fist in the direction of the camp, and muttered:

"Oho! oho! I owe you one each!"

And without more fully explaining his purpose, he turned and disappeared in the gathering gloom.

CHAPTER XII.

BUCKING THE TIGER.

FROM his interview with Limpy Dick, the Squire went to his hotel, the proprietor of which was the agent of the stage line.

"I say, mine host!" he cried, jauntily, "when does the next stage leave here for the Slope?"

"At the peep o' day, the morning," was the reply.

"Chalk me down for a passage."

And the speaker rung several gold coins on the bar.

"As well you as another, sor!"

"Those are pretty fellows—eh, McGlochlin?"

"Don't mention it, yer honor!" replied the Irishman, with a wink.

The Squire picked up one of the coins, and flung it into the air, so that its rapidly revolving disk flashed back the lamplight.

"I'll do it!" he said, communing with himself, "just for the fun of the thing. Unlucky at play, they say, lucky in love; and lucky at play, unlucky in love. I reckon I won't take the warning of the gods, if they show themselves unfavorable!"

And he laughed softly to himself.

"Anyway," he concluded, "I must kill the time between now and bed. I believe I'm getting excited over this thing—that it's making me feverish!"

He held out his hand, and looked at it.

It trembled visibly.

"If I win!—if I win!" he repeated to himself, with a glow diffusing itself through his breast, and sending the color into his cheeks. "It's a stake worth playing for! I wonder if it is only the woman herself that I'm after. Well! well! the money don't turn my stomach, and that's a fact! Five hundred thousand! But, hang it all! I always liked her. He! Bah, he isn't worthy of her, if she hadn't a rap!"

An ugly frown contracted his brow at this point in his reflections, which the Irishman, watching him furtively as he made change for his ticket, observed.

"He's the divil, for all the fair seeming of him!" was Pat's judgment.

Then the Squire smiled as he recollected Limpy Dick, the victim of his tyrannous will.

"Faith! it's his smile that's not the better of the two!" reflected Pat, comparing it with his frown.

So that night saw the Squire enter the Ace of Hearts; and into that temple of the Goddess of Chance he bore neither smile nor frown, but only that stony impassivity of countenance which all her votaries strive to cultivate.

Presiding over the faro table, sat a man whom he could not outvie in this respect.

Dressed in the strange garments without which no one had ever seen him, unless it might be his pard, Little Jingo, at bed-time, the Undertaker performed the manipulations of his office, with the cold, dead precision of a machine.

When he spoke the occasional brief words that the game demanded, no muscle of his face moved other than those employed in the act of articulation.

His voice seemed to come from a cavernous depth in his breast, so deep and hollow was its tone.

Was it profound melancholy that sat upon the man like an incubus; or was it only a personal peculiarity, with no particular significance?

At sight of him, the men of Canyon City had looked upon him as the genius of ill-luck. But then had occurred events—narrated in "Little Jingo; or, the Queer Pard," Half Dime Library No. 373—which had brought him into popular favor.

Since then the boys had honestly tried to like him; but when they lost their money to him, the old feeling would come back.

"Luck won't stand the look of him, an' that's a fact!" grumbled one of them, in a moment of reverse fortunes; and more or less clearly all felt this superstition creep over them.

The result was that, though the old active hostility was not revived, yet one by one the boys fell away from his table; and any one who had the hardihood to brave the weird influence that he was believed to wield was beginning to be looked upon as a man with more "gall" than wisdom.

This bade fair to break up the Undertaker's game, for want of patrons; but then a counter influence set in. When a man was "half-shot," he made it a point to defy the invisible powers that hovered around the Undertaker, and staked his money there to show that he had "gall."

Two or three individuals of this sort were at the table when the Squire entered.

"Hyar's the chap to tackle him!" whispered one of the bystanders, nudging his neighbor, and glancing at the Squire.

In an instant all eyes were directed in the same direction, and comments passed from lip to lip.

Although he had been but a few days in Canyon City, the Squire was already a marked man. No one knew of his having done anything unusual; but his bearing indicated one of those men who make no particular stir until the occasion arises; and then almost anything may be expected of them.

He appeared unconscious of, or indifferent to, this popular attention; and now he took his place at the table as unpretentiously as any one could.

The Undertaker did not look up at him; but kept his eyes fixed on the cards he was turning, as was his wont.

The Squire put a little pile of gold coins on the queen of hearts.

"I'll reverse the augury," he said to himself. "If she is favorable to me, she will stand by me at cards as well as in love."

He smiled faintly to himself, when the turn of the cards proved favorable to him.

"Leave it on the queen," he said, when the croupier would have pushed his winnings over to him.

With that beginning, he went on winning steadily, doubling his stake every time, by adding his gains to what was on the board.

After the first two successes, the spectators were thrilled with excitement, which waxed higher with every turn of the cards.

"What did I tell you?" cried the man who predicted the Squire's fitness to cope with the Undertaker, despite his familiars.

"Somebody ought to go an' call in the boys!" suggested another.

"Every man carries out his own idea!" said a third.

"Oh! you go hang!" cried the proposer of this kindly scheme to let all share in the spectacle that they believed was now to be enacted. "I wouldn't lose this hyar fur any galoot that ever sot foot in Canyon City!"

But as the game progressed another proved more generous, and rushed out to spread the news that the Undertaker had got his match at last.

The effect was soon apparent, as men came rushing breathlessly into the saloon, until the room was packed with eager spectators.

At first there were those who wished to profit by "standing in" with the man who had come there to "bust" the bank. But the general sentiment was that "playing hog" would "knock" the stranger's luck; so pressure was brought to bear to make them hold off, and leave him a clear field.

In the midst of the excitement Little Jingo made his appearance.

CHAPTER XIII.

CLEANED OUT.

THE Ace of Hearts and all it contained was his property. He had won it all from Hank Sullivan, breaking his bank and "cleaning him out," as the Squire now threatened to serve him.

Therefore he was eagerly greeted at once.

"Hollo, pard! You've come to your own funeral!" shouted one of his many admirers and friends, jocularly.

"Is that so?" asked Little Jingo, smiling unconcernedly.

"Charley," said Burt Younger, making his way to his side, and speaking to him in confidence, "can't you turn the keards, in place o' the Undertaker? Something's got to be done to stop his dog's luck. The Squire's sot to clean him out, an' no mistake."

"That ain't a dead-sure thing, is it?"

"Oh! but look at how the thing's runnin'! He's doubled on him every time, an' scooped him in like grease!"

"Ah!" said Little Jingo, coolly. "Then a single turn the other way may floor the Squire."

"If it ever comes!"

"It's sure to come, if they play long enough." "But whar did you ever see a bank that could stand that sort o' thing all day?"

"It won't run all day, Burt."

"But with a galoot like the Undertaker! Hang it all! thar ain't no tellin' what luck will do with such a snoozer! Whar did he git his mug from, an' his general all-round style?"

Little Jingo smiled indulgently.

"I thought you had about made up your mind that the Undertaker was a middlin' good sort, in spite of his looks," he observed.

"Waal, thar didn't pan out the way it looked," admitted Burt. "But I stepped up an' eat my crow along o' the rest, without nary wry face. An' this hyar's different. The thing's right under our noses; an' seein's believin'."

"All of which may be true, without the Undertaker bein' to blame."

"But all the boys is ready to back that proposition."

"If I remember rightly, they all backed the other."

"That sounds all right," said Burt, with a dubious shake of the head; "but it don't put the money back in your pocket."

He was like many another debater, who, granting that the argument is against him, clings to his opinion all the same.

But now Little Jingo was hailed on all sides with good-natured banter.

"Thar's a hole in yer bank, old chappy, an' all yer shiners is runnin' out!"

"Every good man finds his match, one day or another."

"The bank's a goner, Charley."

To all of which Little Jingo replied cheerfully:

"There's more back of that, an' don't you furgit it!"

But the time came when the croupier, after counting out the last losses, whispered to the dealer.

Everybody felt that this was the bank's last stake. If luck did not turn now, it was doomed.

Even Little Jingo showed some signs of anxiety. He, with the others, waited the next turn of the cards with bated breath.

The Undertaker was the only man in the room, if we except the Squire, who sat like ice. Once more the queen won!

"Leave it on the board," said the Squire unconcernedly.

The boys stood dumb, with all eyes turned toward Charley.

He flushed, and his eyes flashed with determination, as he made his way through the crowd toward the table.

He was going to take his stand there, and fight to the death.

For the first time, the Undertaker lifted his eyes and fixed them upon Charley's face. There was in them a summons to his side.

Little Jingo, leaving unuttered the words that had trembled on his lips, went round to him.

While he was doing so, the Undertaker wrote a line on a scrap of paper, and handed it to him when he came within reach.

It read:

"Have you a right to ruin yourself now? Remember, you will not be alone."

There was no more explicit reference to Colorado Kate. But it was not necessary; Little Jingo understood.

A warm glow centered about his heart, and he came to a sudden resolution.

"It'll let me out with clean hands," he said to himself.

Then, after a word of conference with the croupier, in which he learned the exact state of the bank, he addressed the Squire.

"Stranger," he said, "you've made a mighty good haul; but you're jest as welcome as flowers in May. Thar ain't enough in the till to cover your stake; but ef you'll give us a show fur our money, we'll put up this hyar shebang and all thar is in it. You might as well make a clean sweep while you're about it; and then we'll step on the outside, an' leave you on the inside, all serene!"

"What is your concern worth?" asked the Squire, indifferently.

"I'll leave you to say."

"Oh, no! I shouldn't think of putting a price on what belongs to another. It's all one to me. Make it whatever you like, and don't keep the game waiting."

Everybody admired the princely swing of the man who disdained to dicker, while he carelessly knocked the ashes off his cigar.

"When I won it of Hank Sullivan, the other day," said Little Jingo, "it went into the pot at a round thousand. Make it eight hundred."

"It's worth fifteen," said the Squire, without taking the trouble to look about and see what the place contained. "Put it at that, if you please."

"Excuse me!" said Little Jingo, with a slight show of feeling. "I never take odds of any man. I've made up my mind to drop every dollar that Hank Sullivan ever had his dirty paws on, an' then go out of this business; or I'd fight you with my pile. We'll put this in at jest what I got it for, an' say no more about it."

For the last time the queen won.

The Undertaker rose.

"Me an' my pard is on the outside," said Little Jingo, without apparent regret. "The next man as turns these pasteboards will be a man of

your choosin'. An' now, ef you will join me an' the crowd at your own bar, we'll drink to better luck fur you than we've had."

"I should prefer to leave at the box the gentleman I found there. He deals a square game."

"I am obliged to you," said the Undertaker, in his sepulchral voice; "but I shall never turn another card as long as I live."

And when they had drank to the success of the new proprietor, he walked out of the place at Little Jingo's side, with his head hanging on his breast.

He did not see the glances that followed him. That night's work went far to undermine the popularity which the saving of Little Jingo's life had won him.

As unreasonable as it was, every one of the boys felt that he had "cleaned out" his pard.

Limpy Dick drank in their comments with a ghoulish relish.

"Good! good!" he muttered to himself. "This is a beginning!"

Little Jingo slapped his dejected pard on the shoulder.

"Come! come!" he cried. "None o' this!"

"I've ruined you!" said the Undertaker.

"You've saved Kate!" replied Charley. "I'd have made a blamed fool of myself, but for that note."

And he grasped his pard's hand with grateful warmth.

The time was coming when he would look back upon that hand-clasp, and feel that it covered the man who received it with infamy!

CHAPTER XIV.

LITTLE JINGO'S WEDDING-DAY.

The day of Little Jingo's wedding had arrived, and all Canyon City was in a state of pleasurable excitement.

The "gospel sharp" from Twiu Bluffs had come down to perform the ceremony, in which all the boys were to "take a hand."

This was the first wedding that had taken place in the camp, and "all hands" determined that it should be "done up brown."

Some of the younger and more harum-scarum of Charley's friends had put their heads together and planned a practical joke on him and his bride; but an unexpected event frustrated their designs.

"What in Cain have you fellers been hangin' around my shanty all day for?" he asked, at last impressed by the fact that they had forced their attention upon him by one excuse or another, some seeking to divert him while others lounged about idly.

"Why, Charley, old boy," was the laughing reply, "this hyar's the last we'll see of you before you change your name!"

"You go hang!"

But, with a twinkle in his eye, he let them have their way.

When the time arrived for the joining of his fate to that of the woman he loved, he said to the crowd:

"Gents, thar's been somethin' goin' on under the rose."

He looked at his friends with a curious smile, and they betrayed their guilt by their looks.

"Blowed if he hasn't dropped to us!" muttered one.

But Little Jingo kept on:

"This hyar shanty, the which it's good enough fur me an' my pard, ain't the ticket fur Mrs. Charles Lowden, ye understand. So I've been fittin' up a place what's more like, up the gulch a piece, on the sly, so to speak. Ef you'll be so good as to foller us up yon, we'll make ye heartily welcome to the best we've got in the way o' grub, an' good dancin', an'—"

He paused, looking about on the expectant faces, and then added with a smile:

"Good whisky!"

Such a yell as went up at his little joke. It set the boys' mouths to watering; and they were for marching for that shanty as if to carry it by storm.

But Burt Younger interposed to stay their impetuosity.

"Hold on, boys!" he cried. "Now I've got a leetle circus what I've planned all alone by myself. Jest you keep yer shirts on tell the racket's opened up. Hyar, half a dozen o' you stalwarts, step this way! Hold on! I don't want the hull raft of ye! You, Pete, an' Jake, an' Cock-eye, an' Billy Buncome—we can't do nothin' without Billy Buncome, ye know!—an' you, Micky Finn. How many does that make? One, two, three—five; an' I'm six. We want two more."

"Fur the sweet love o' God! take me, Burt!" cried one of the boys, with grotesque earnestness.

"You, Stumpy?" cried Younger—"you're too short. That ain't your fault; but we want—"

"Short!" cried Stumpy, with disdain. "But I weigh a ton—an' I kin lick my weight in wild-cats!"

"That won't do," persisted Burt.

And he proceeded to select two more sturdy giants, making a company not one of whom stood less than six feet in their stockings.

With these he marched off, while the crowd stood waiting, wondering what had been got up in honor of Charley's wedding.

During the interval Colorado Kate turned to her husband so soon to be, with a pretty blush on her cheeks.

"Have you been building a house all for me?" she asked.

"All for you?—to keep old maid's hall in?" cried Little Jingo, with affected dismay. "Not by a long chalk!"

"I'll pay you for that!" she said, as those who stood around her burst into a laugh at her expense.

But it was drowned by a yell of delight, as Burt Younger and his company made their appearance from the rear of the hotel where they had gone.

They bore two chairs, fastened side by side on a little platform, supported on two long poles, the use of which was apparent at a glance.

Setting this down beside the surprised bridal couple, Burt took off his hat, and addressed them with a bow and a scrape of his foot.

"You, marm, an' you—ahem!—sir!"

But as he delivered himself of this word which came so awkwardly to his lips in connection with one with whom he was so familiar as with Little Jingo, the crowd interrupted him with a shout of laughter.

"Oh! draw it mild, Burt!" cried one of the boys.

"Call him Mr. Lowden!"

"No! no! Make it—ladies and gentlemen!"

"You dry up!" shouted Younger, reddening in spite of himself. "Who's runnin' this thing?"

"Go on, Burt. You're doin' well."

"Bein's as how your good man as-is-to-be is cock o' the walk in this hyar burgh," pursued Burt, disdaining the crowd, and addressing himself to Colorado Kate, whose mouth kept twitching with the impulse to laugh at him; "an' bein's as how you, marm, take the cake fur good looks an'—an'—"

But compliment, at any rate so publicly expressed, did not come easily to honest Burt's tongue; and he stammered and blushed to find that he had gone so far; and came to a dead halt.

"Winnin' ways!" prompted one of his tormentors.

At which the rest roared.

"Oh, shoot the orator!" cried one on the outskirts of the crowd.

"Little Jingo," expostulated another vivacious wit, "I wouldn't stand that! He's makin' love to your bride right under yer nose!"

But Burt wouldn't be put down by any such means. To use a Yankee expression, "his dander riz," and lifting his voice above the hubbub, he shouted:

"That's my idee exactly! Bein's as how you take the cake fur good looks an' *winnin' ways*; an' bein's, lastly, as this hyar is the first weddin' as has struck the camp, it lodged in the topknot of yours truly that the boys would like to show ye as how they wish ye a long life an' a big family, by thunder!"

Loud and long were the cheers and laughter that greeted this speech, the orator gesticulating wildly with his clinched fist, and bobbing his head defiantly at his audience, as he made his absurd climax.

Little Jingo laughed with the rest, not a little pleased at this sign of the popularity of himself and bride.

"Boys," he said, "you won't look to me to sling the flourishes like the distinguished orator what's perceded me; but when I say that this hyar strikes a man whar he lives, you'll know my feelin's as well as if I chinned it to ye from now tell sundown."

This acknowledgment was cheered to the echo.

Then, resting the hand which held his hat behind him on his hip, and thrusting the other forward, Burt said:

"Marm, you *will* allow me?"

Colorado Kate bowed as she accepted his hand, and permitted him to lead her upon this primitive throne; but she did not trust herself to speak, lest she should "crack the smile which she repressed only by biting hard on her pretty upper lip."

Little Jingo followed, rosy as radiant.

Then Burt commanded his men:
"Raise her, boys! Stiddy, thar! Consarn ye! air ye tryin' to spill 'em out?"

For in their enthusiasm the boys had lifted too much on one side, so that Kate caught hold of her lover with a little shriek of dismay.

The crowd laughed and chaffed the incautious bearers.

"You're a healthy lot, *you air!* Why don't you let that job out?"

"Maybe you'd like the contract!" retorted Billy Buncome.

"I wouldn't be found dead in sich a spavined an' wind-galled crowd!"

"You've brung the leetle one's gizzard into her mouth. I reckon she wishes she was well out o' that scrape."

Indeed, Colorado Kate clung to little Jingo, perceptibly pale and ill at ease, though she laughed.

"Now, go easy, an' all together!" cried Burt, over his shoulder, out of patience with the want of concert in his men's motions.

"Hay-foot! straw-foot!" shouted one of the crowd, by way of getting them in step.

"Thar's too many head bosses in this hyar crowd!" growled one of the bearers, as he changed step with an awkward shuffle.

But they got all right at last, and then the "procesh" moved with ringing cheers and yells, and a wild swinging of hats and tossing of them into the air.

CHAPTER XV.

A SNARL FROM LIMPY DICK.

NEVER was a more enthusiastic triumphal march than this. But one man in the camp refused to enter into the spirit of it.

It is needless to say that this churl was Limpy Dick.

"The blasted fools!" he growled below his breath, as he hobbled along on the outskirts of the crowd. "I reckon, now, that sorrel-top galoot allows he's some, cocked up thar on the shoulders o' them long-legged roosters!"

But his lips quivered and his heart turned sick with the thought that it was Colorado Kate, the woman he coveted so madly, who was sharing with her whole heart in Little Jingo's triumph.

So they went out of the camp, up the gulch, to a new shanty which Charley had had built for the reception of his bride.

"We'll have it quiet an' all to ourselves, out hyar," he explained to her. "The boys is all right—*fur boys!* But when a galoot gits to be a family man, ye understand, why, then he wants somethin' different. Havin' a gang o' drunken snoozers a-yellin' an' shootin' their weepens off at twelve o'clock at night right under his nose gits to be a leetle monotonous."

There was another reason too. Having abandoned gambling, he was going to give his attention to prospecting; and he thought he saw indications of gold in this direction.

The retirement of the Undertaker from the Ace of Hearts, which Little Jingo had planned from the first, even if he had not been "cleaned out" by the Squire, would now leave them to pursue their search together.

With his wife and his pard, Little Jingo looked forward to a new life of happiness.

Arrived at the shanty, Colorado Kate squeezed his hand and looked her appreciation of his thoughtful care.

Everything was bright and new, and though the bare floors and equally bare walls, the clumsy pine chairs and table, and the bunks built against the wall, would have impressed one used to Eastern luxury as rather rude; yet it was by far the best furnished shanty in Canyon City, and struck every one who saw it that day as a marvel of neatness and comfort.

But what "took the eye" of the boys, and was a source of not a little pride to its future mistress, was the rough pine dresser which flanked the mud-daubed fireplace. On it were ranged, standing on their edges, with their bottoms against the wall, a half-dozen plates of blue and white delf. Before them stood an equal number of cups and saucers of the same ware. A lot of knives and forks, as bright as steel could be polished, teaspoons and tablespoons of pewter—But, there! if we stop to enumerate the pots and kettles and other utensils that were snugly stored away in the bottom of this famous dresser, we shall be all the longer coming to the crowning glory of all—a broad, oval platter which reflected back the admiring faces pausing before it, broadened with smiles of wondering delight.

"Tin!" shouted one of the boys, carried away by his emotions. Waal, now, you bet yer sweet life my lord an' my lady don't gobble their

grub off o' no sich dog-gone, low-lived metal as that. It's chany ur nothin' with 'em, by thunder!"

"You'll have a chance to sample the thing yerself, one o' these fine days," said Little Jingo, moved to hospitality by this indirect and wholly unintentional flattery.

"No! Sho! Waal, I sw'ar!" cried the delighted miner.

And flinging his hat down upon the floor, he leaped into the air, struck his feet together thrice, and came down on it with a yell.

"Whoop!"

And affecting to spit in the palm of his hand, he thrust it forward, and stood regarding his prospective entertainer with his mouth wide open, making the pantomime of a boisterous laugh.

Little Jingo shook the proffered hand heartily, and then, with his hat cocked on the side of his head, and his hands on his hips, so as to throw his arms akimbo, the miner, affecting a grotesque strut, moved on, to give place to the next wondering spectator.

So the shanty was inspected and commented on in a way most gratifying to Little Jingo, who had spared no pains to give the woman of his love a pleasant surprise.

There was a happy tear in her eye and a tremor in her voice as she whispered to him:

"I'd have gone to the old shanty, and never said a word."

"But I'd rather you'd come to this, and say a good many words!" he replied, with a twinkle in his eye, and pinching her.

"I shall—words that you'll like to hear!" she answered him.

"I'll stake my pile on that!" said Little Jingo. Then came the time to "stand up" before the "gospel sharp," and be "hitched fur life."

Colorado Kate was dressed in white, and wore a wreath of wild flowers, in lieu of orange blossoms. And she had a bridesmaid, too, dressed exactly like herself, barring the wreath.

But who was to be Little Jingo's "best man?" It was Limpy Dick who asked, with his cynical whine:

"Whar's the Undertaker? I allow he's the man as ought to stand up with his pard. It's mighty queer as he ain't on hand at sich a time as this hyar."

The smile died away from Little Jingo's face, and a slight flush of annoyance took its place, as he looked about.

He had said nothing about it to the Undertaker. He had not thought it necessary, taking it for granted that his pard would expect to stand by him in this signal event of his life.

But the Undertaker was unquestionably not at hand.

Limpy Dick uttered a low:

"H'm!"

And with a contraction of the eyes and a peculiar, half-sneering smile, he turned his evil glance upon Colorado Kate's face, so that, without knowing just why, she flamed scarlet, and demanded hotly:

"What do you mean, you—"

But the angry, resentful words died on her lips, as she saw Little Jingo turn toward her, and lifting her eyes, met his glance.

He had turned with surprise at her anger. He saw her grow suddenly pale. He looked from her to Limpy Dick for an explanation, and encountered that insinuating smile.

A deathlike silence had fallen upon the company assembled. The men stared blankly, as little suspiciously as Charley himself; but the eyes of the women flashed with keen curiosity, as if they already began to scent some mystery.

Little Jingo felt hurt at the desertion of his pard at such a time, and annoyed with Limpy Dick for marring the pleasure of the occasion with his surly humor; but he resolved not to have his wedding spoiled by unpleasant memories; and commanding his features, he said, lightly:

"Waal, my pard's a crooked stick—we all know that. But ef he don't do to tie to in a weddin', he'll back ye like a sack o' wild-cats in a fight; an' I reckon that thar's somethin'."

And laughing, he turned to Burt Younger.

"Burt, old man, you won't go back on me at this most tryin' moment? I allow, ef the Undertaker's wantin' the cheek to face the ladies, you ain't troubled in that way!"

"You do me proud!" replied Younger, doffing his hat with a majestic sweep, and scraping his foot on the floor. "As fur the ladies, ef so be they kin stand it, I allow I kin!"

And in the general laugh that followed, the threatening cloud lifted.

Then the knot was tied; and shortly afterward the boys might have been seen taking as-

tronomical observations through long-necked bottles!

It goes without saying that they were cheerful enough from that time on!

Limpy Dick had witnessed the ceremony which made the woman he loved the wife of another, with an irresistible twitching of his white lips and a clinching of his hands. But he had not the heart to join in the merry-making.

He slunk out of the house, and went away into the mountains, gnashing his teeth, and cursing his ill fortune.

Far out in the craggy wilderness, he came upon a man sitting on a bowlder, with his elbows on his knees and his face in his hands, through the fingers of which trickled silent tears.

The man of desolate sorrowing was the Undertaker.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE UNDERTAKER "TURNS UP."

It was not to be expected that the boys would get through such an occasion as Little Jingo's wedding, with free whisky flowing like water, and all come off with whole skins.

The fiddler got so "boosy" that he played jig tunes to waltz time.

But the boys did not quarrel with that. They "hoed it down," each to his own fancy, and willingly granted Old Rosin-the-Bow the same freedom.

But, unfortunately, there were not ladies enough to go round; and when two stogy-booted gallants fell by the ears over one coquette, Colorado Kate, to keep peace on her wedding-day, had to carry off the most quarrelsome, who, in thus securing the belle of the ball, felt himself more than paid for the loss of the other.

But when a man's skin is full of whisky, he has not far to go for a pretext to fight; so Little Jingo, too, had his hands full, settling the numberless disputes that constantly rose. Some he laughed out of their dudgeon, and some he was fain to make "walk Spanish" out of the house.

By this management, the "shindy" passed off without any one getting "knifed" or having "daylight let through him." But it must be confessed that a grudge was there born between two who "had it out" on the way home. In the scrimmage one had an ear "chawed" off, and one was most beautifully laid out for the undertaker.

However, take it all in all, the boys voted it "the sweetest blow-out on record."

It was midnight before Little Jingo "turned them out of the house," and the Undertaker had not yet made his appearance. Indeed, he did not present himself until the following day, just before dark.

"A fine fellow you are!" cried Little Jingo, good-naturedly, though not without a trace of the feeling that his pard had not used him quite "white." "I'd begun to think that you'd shook the ranch fur good an' all. Whar in Cain have you been, anyway?"

Standing with his hat in his hand, as if he were a guest in that house, the Undertaker replied, in his wonted monotone:

"I've brought you ill luck enough, without setting myself at your wedding feast like a death's-head. I know that it is only out of their liking for you that people put up with me at all; and I don't add anything to their merry-making."

"Look a-hyar, pard!" cried Little Jingo, with generous heat; "ef you don't want to fight, you don't put on no highfalutin' flourishes with yer humble sarvant, ye understand!"

And snatching the hat from the Undertaker's hand, he threw it into a corner. Then he placed a chair at the table with a bang, and continued:

"Thar you set, like one o' the family; an' thar you stick, by thunder! an' no back-talk!"

The Undertaker could not be unmoved by this rough loyalty.

But Little Jingo was not Little Jingo's wife, and he looked at her for her indorsement of her husband's hearty welcome.

Colorado Kate had just turned from where she had been bending over the fire, cooking the supper.

Was it the heat that caused the flush on her cheeks? Or did she recall the expression in Limpy Dick's eyes when he looked at her and sneered at the absence of the Undertaker?

"If you're waiting on me," she said, "you'd ought to know, without my telling you, that Charley's friends are my friends, and Charley's pards—"

She stopped with sudden embarrassment, as if she had unconsciously run upon the expression

which little Jingo caught up and finished for her, with a laugh:

"Air your pards! Ha! ha! ha! I like that, I do! That's the kind of a woman I knowed I was tyin' to. Thar's the Widder Malcom, now, as when old Malcom was around use' ter take his cronies, neck an' crop, an' pitch 'em into the street. An' then thar's them as looks black, an' says nothin'; but you know that they're growlin' all the while on the inside. But my pards is Kate's pards; an' we stan's by 'em, I want ye to onderstand!"

With that the Undertaker took his place at the table, thanking his friends brokenly; and by the time the supper was over, seemed to have slipped back into his old place, before the change in Little Jingo's relations.

Little Jingo was delighted. Alas! the time was coming when he would recall the scene, and ask himself with a bursting heart whether the Undertaker's embarrassment was caused by gratitude, as he now supposed.

"Pard," he said, after supper, "we've got the leetle pile safe an' snug. I looked fur ye last night; an' now, ef you say so, we'll put your half along with the rest."

And then the Undertaker did a thing which showed Little Jingo's unbounded confidence in his pard. It showed, too, the perfect simplicity and sincerity of the man he had so implicitly trusted.

On removing his cloak before sitting down to supper, he had taken from about his waist a large leather belt, which had been supported by straps passing over his shoulders, like suspenders.

This he now got from where he had left it with his cloak, and placed it on the table, from which Kate had removed the tea-service.

Outside the shanty a man was peering in through a chink in the curtain, which Little Jingo had imperfectly drawn.

One glance at the shrunken body, the pinched face, and the greedy glitter of the weasel-like eyes, would have satisfied any one that it was none other than Limpy Dick.

He had been on the watch for the Undertaker's return; and the darkness had given him his chance to spy upon his reception.

He had cursed Little Jingo's blind confidence in the Undertaker and in his wife.

"What ef he don't believe it?" he asked himself, and then ground his teeth in rage. "He's got to believe it! I'll git a double half-hitch on that galoot somehow! They don't look comfortable, either the Undertaker or Kate. I wish I was in thar to call Little Jingo's attention to it. I reckon it's the bee I put in her bonnet, what makes her so rosy."

He chuckled softly to himself; but then, remembering the part he was forced to play, he ended with a smothered snarl of fury.

So he watched them through the supper; but when he saw the belt brought forward, and heard the thud which attested its weight, he became fairly wolfish in the eagerness with which he glared through the chink, into the room.

"That's rocks!" he muttered to himself. "It's Little Jingo's pile! What is that galoot a-doin' with it, I'd like to know? Has he let him go scootin' about the country with that thar thing by him? He's a bigger fool than I took him to be."

Within, Little Jingo said:

"I reckon it'll stand us in hand to take a leetle squint outside, before we open up. Two sich belts as that thar ain't a-layin' 'round loose, all over Canyon City, I want ye to onderstand!"

He went to the door, and even out into the night, strolling about the house, whistling softly: so that, if any one chanced to be in the neighborhood—which was far from likely—and saw him, it would appear that he was taking the air idly.

Limpy Dick had crouched down close under the wall of the house, in the dense shadow, where he lay, scarcely daring to breathe.

Would he be detected?

CHAPTER XVII.

MULTIPLICATION AND DIVISION.

LITTLE JINGO did not dream of looking for a spy, and so looked only away from the shanty, never toward it.

Returning, he said:

"It's all right, o' course. Now fur our bank safe!"

He raked the fire to one side of the fireplace, observing:

"We made this fireplace big enough, Kate, so that you don't have to put the fire out to git into yer bank."

Then he patted a certain stone with an affectionate smile.

"That thar's the door what we says 'Open Sesame!' to; an' then we go into our gold cave, like the Forty Thieves! Ha! ha! ha! The ashes keeps it from gittin' too hot, jest like I told ye."

He inserted the point of his knife between that stone and the next, and after a little prying, lifted it out of place, discovering a deep hole.

Into this inserted his arm to the elbow, and drew forth a belt like that the Undertaker had brought.

He put it on the table beside the other, and stood off to view them with smiling satisfaction.

"Jest heft them thar, my girl!" he said to Kate.

She went and lifted first one and then the other.

That they were equally heavy was evident from the effort she had to put forth, and the dull thud with which they struck the table as she set them down again.

Limpy Dick's eyes nearly protruded from his head in the stare with which he gloated on this accumulation of wealth.

"It's a king's ransom!" he cried. "I'd give somethin' to jest heft them myself."

He was soon to have his curiosity gratified; for Little Jingo went on:

"Them's rocks," he said—"solid rocks! Ef you was guessin', what'd ye guess them weighed apiece?"

"Oh, I can't say!" replied Kate, gazing from the belts to her husband proudly.

"They'll average up thirty-five pounds, both on 'em—that I'll swear to!" said Little Jingo, meaning that they would weigh thirty-five pounds each.

"But how much is that in money's worth?" asked Kate, breathlessly. "It must be a lot!"

"A lot!" repeated Little Jingo. "Waal, I reckon! That kind o' lots don't lay around loose out o' doors in Canyon City, muchly!"

"No. But how much is there?"

"Ye kin figger it yerself. I allow, now, Kate, you'd orter be handy at figgers."

He looked at her inquiringly.

She laughed, knowing that his love for her made him think that she was clever at anything and everything.

"Oh, I know the multiplication table—you can count on that," she said, teasingly.

"Waal," he went on, while his eyes rested on her face admiringly and fondly. "thar's eighteen dollars to the ounce, an' sixteen ounces to the pound, an' thirty-five pounds in the belt. How much does that make?"

"Well, let me see," she said, putting her head a little on one side as she fixed her attention on the figures. "Six times eight are forty-eight; and six times one are six, and four to carry are ten. That's a hundred and eight. And ten eights are a hundred and eighty. That's two hundred and eighty-eight dollars to the pound, ain't it? Then, five times eight are forty; and five times eight are forty, and four are forty-four; and five times two are ten, and four are fourteen. That's fourteen hundred and forty for the five. Then a cipher's a cipher; and three times eight are twenty-four; and three times eight are twenty-four again, and two are twenty-six; keep six hundred and forty in your mind's eye!—and three times two are six, and two are eight. That's eight thousand, six hundred and forty. And how much did we have for the five?"

"Fourteen hundred an' forty!" cried Little Jingo, delightedly. "I've got that thar whar no investigatin' committee won't git at it—an' don't ye furgit it! Go on with yer rat-killin'!"

"Fourteen hundred and forty to eighty-six hundred and forty," continued Kate, her cheeks glowing with pleasure as she saw how proud of her readiness with figures made her husband.

"Two forties are eighty, and six and four are ten—a cipher and one to carry; and eight and one are nine, and one more are ten. That's ten thousand and eighty in each belt, and twenty thousand, one hundred and sixty in the two!"

"Hooray! Jest look a' that, now!" shouted Little Jingo.

And whirling round to the Undertaker, he grasped his hand, and shook it as if he would not be content without dislocating his shoulder.

"How's that, pard?—how's that fur a head-piece? Do ye know how long it took me to figger that out? The hefty part of a day, by thunder! Why, sir! I whittled up the stump end of a lead-pencil—the last one I had in the world, blow me ef it wa'n't!—over that thar! An' hyar she's jest spit 'er out like ketchin' a greased pig by the ear!—jest like the pig's gittin' away, I mean!"

And Little Jingo laughed uproariously over his correction.

"But twenty thousand dollars!" cried Kate, hastening to turn attention from herself.

It was enough to know how she had delighted the man she loved. She did not want his extravagant praises—at any rate, not before another, even his pard.

"Twenty thousand dollars! That's ten thousand apiece, ain't it?"

And she clasped her hand with wonder and pride, and the kind of awe that one feels at the thought of possessing a large sum of money.

"It all belongs to your husband, madam," was the Undertaker's grave correction. "I brought nothing into Canyon City, and I have made nothing since I have been here."

"The deuce it does!" cried Little Jingo, indignantly. "Waal, I sw'ar, ef that thar ain't bein' pards with a vengeance!"

The Undertaker smiled sadly.

"If there was to be any sharing between us, where all belonged to you," he said, "let us say that I lost my share in losing the Ace of Hearts!"

"You be blowed!" said Little Jingo, picking up one of the belts to end the discussion.

It was plain that he would brook no denial in his determination that what was theirs should be theirs in common.

But he couldn't dismiss all at once the idea his pard had advanced; and as he proceeded to put the belts into the cache under the hearth, he muttered:

"I reckon, ef you was to make a stake, an' I was to git shut o' this hyar, you'd kick me out! The deuce ye would!"

Which showed that he took it for granted that his pard was as generous as himself.

Kate looked at her husband with a pride and affection in her eye which proved that in her he had a worthy mate.

She had lived in the West all her life; and to her the tie that bound Little Jingo to the Undertaker was almost as sacred as that which bound him to her.

She would have been disappointed in him if he had been less generous. At the same time she knew that there were men who would have thought it the right thing to keep all that had belonged to them before the formation of such a partnership.

As for herself, she did not grudge this share out of their abundance to a man whose only fault was his dog's luck.

"Don't waste no more breath over that thar!" chuckled Limpy Dick to himself. "I will make easier reckonin' between ye, before long, jest to keep peace in the family!"

He waited until he had seen Little Jingo secure the stone over the cache, and rake the fire back to its place; and then he crept away, muttering:

"I'm full, I am—chuck up! I don't want to see no more! An' I ain't baugin' around fur to have him come out an' drop onto me! Twenty thousand! Whe-e-w!"

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE BLOW FALLS.

SEVERAL weeks of quiet happiness followed Little Jingo's marriage.

The boys growled at having lost him so entirely; and after the first week they used all sorts of inducements to draw him back to his old haunts; but in vain.

He laughed at them, and recommended them, one and all, to get married; when they too would prefer a quiet fireside to the noisy bar.

"But why in Cain d'ye want to live 'way out hyar in the wilderness?" they urged. "Come back into the camp, an' we'll put up a shanty fur ye, a dog-gone sight finer'n this hyar, by thunder! Reckon, now, you sets glowerin' at the Undertaker, an' he sets glowerin' at you; an' thar you sets as flat as stale beer!"

"Don't you believe it!" replied Little Jingo, with a twinkle in his eye.

"I sw'ar, I believe you two is takin' more pay-dirt out o' that thar hole in the ground than you let on!" declared one, unable to think of any other reason for this strange seclusion.

"Come out hyar an' try yer hand!" laughed Little Jingo. "Come, now! what'll ye give me fur my claim? Put up, or shut up!"

But, under the pretense of calling upon Little Jingo all in a friendly way, the boys had looked the ground over thoroughly, and concluded that it wouldn't pay to pull up stakes and stampede up the gulch; so there were no offers.

Then they let him alone.

And now Little Jingo and his pard were picking and shoveling patiently side by side, when the Undertaker rested on his shovel, and wiped the perspiration from his dripping brow.

"I say, pard!" observed Little Jingo, looking at his companion critically, "you ain't well. What's the row?"

"No, I'm not feeling quite right," admitted the Undertaker, wearily.

"You're too white-livered lookin'," added Little Jingo. "An' this mornin' I noticed you was off yer feed. You ain't goin' to have the chills, air ye?"

"I reckon not."

"Suppose you throw off fur to-day, an' pull fur the shanty? Kate'll fix ye comfortable. She has a sleight that way."

Little Jingo always wound up with that indorsement of Kate. Taking his word for it, she had a "sleight" for almost everything.

But the Undertaker did not smile.

"I believe I will take a little rest," he said.

Little Jingo looked meditatively at the ground under his feet, as he observed in a different tone of voice:

"I say, pard! This hyar hole's worse'n the last. I allow our luck's about petered out in this hyar gulch. Ha! ha!" laughing softly. "Ef the boys knowed how we was sold comin' up hyar, I reckon they wouldn't think it was the pay-dirt that was keepin' us, eh?"

"It ought to be somewhere here," replied the Undertaker. "We've got the formation."

"That's what I've said all along; an' that thar's what's kept me peggin' away when we ain't makin' our salt."

His hope seemed to revive at this seconding of his opinion by his pard; and as he spit on his hands preparatory to taking up his pick again, he said, briskly:

"Tell Kate that I won't be home until sundown. I'm goin' to knock *some*thin' out o' this hole before I leave it!"

And he went to work with a will.

The Undertaker watched him a moment absently, and then walked away, without a word further of leave-taking.

But Little Jingo was too used to his odd way to think strange of this.

He toiled away in solitude until it was too dark to see; and then shouldering his tools, he proceeded to trudge homeward, whistling softly to himself, like a man with not a care in the world, blow high, blow low.

He was thinking of a cosy kitchen, with a bright-faced housewife flitting hither and yon, bathed in the golden glow of the firelight.

"An' thar's the Undertaker, a-settin' on one side o' the fireplace—I'll bet a hundred dollars! wrapped up in a blanket, an' with his feet in a bucket, a-gittin' cocked an' primed fur a straight ten-hours' sweat! But yer humble servant's comin' in fur a swig at his rum punch, you jest bet yer bottom dollar! Swipe me over the smeller ef it ain't jest *away* up, this hyar gittin' married! An' a man's luck don't peter out thar, ye onderstand. Thar's whar he lives! Thar's whar he ties up!"

As this happy assurance passed his lips, he came to a turn in the mountain-path which brought him within view of his home.

He looked—to see all dark where he had fully expected to be greeted by the fire-light streaming from the open door, if indeed it was not obstructed by a far more welcome object—his wife on the lookout for him, impatient at his delay.

An exclamation of surprise escaped his lips. Then he felt a sudden thrill at the heart.

Why did he feel a quick chill about his mouth? Why did he hasten his steps? Why did he toss his tools down beside the door, and crossing the threshold with a terrible hush on him, stand in that darkened room, staring about him dumbly?

He did not call to her. He did not call to the Undertaker.

He stood in the middle of the room, listening to the rasping sound of his breathing, and counting the pounding thuds of his heart.

What a strange thing it was, to be sure! He had never noticed it before. But now he could feel and hear the rush of the blood through the arteries in his neck.

Then up and down his spine there ran such an odd play of chills. It was like the crackling lightning he had watched of a hot summer's night, shooting in a thousand directions through the clouds, with only an occasional faint rumble of thunder.

How still it was in the shanty, and, for that matter, everywhere out of doors. Had every one in all the world died? How strangely terrible it would be to be the only living thing on the earth!—not a human being, not even an animal of all the myriads that had swarmed an hour ago!

As he stood there staring into rayless darkness, the walls of the shanty seemed to move away from him—further and further, and yet further!—until he seemed to be the only thing in a vast black void!

It wearied his brain to try to reach out in

thought through the limitless space that surrounded him.

How he got to the fire-place, or why he went there, he never knew. Perhaps the vision of the crackling logs that had filled his imagination so recently, still lingering unnoted in his memory, led him to feel for the warmth where the light had been blotted out.

Instead of falling upon warm ashes, his extended hand pressed the bare stones of the hearth, and moving from side to side, suddenly stopped.

No ejaculation passed his lips. On the contrary, his breath stopped, his heart stood still!—not a muscle stirred; not a nerve thrilled!

His hand had found an opening—a hole in the hearth. A stone had been removed!

Those that were left were cold. There had been no fire over them for an hour, for two hours, for three hours, for four hours, for five hours!—since his pard had left him.

His pard! His pard! His pard!

He sunk, rather than sat down on the hearth, and leaned his head against the back of the fire-place.

Ah! how tired he was, and dull, and old, and chill!

The chill of that hearth seemed to have struck into his bones! Would he ever be warm again?

It was a queer thing, after all, come to think of it, that the Undertaker had hurried away so, when he had called to him. And he had heard her voice, talking to somebody.

And then, why had he stayed away from the wedding? Maybe he couldn't bear to see her married to another man!

What was it that Limpy Dick had said? He couldn't remember. He could only recall Kate's strange anger, and the odd look on her face.

The rest had looked at him curiously, too, come to think of it—especially the women. What was it they had made of Limpy Dick's growl?

And if the Undertaker was sick— Now, it was queer that he should have that fit of sickness just when their luck had petered out. And then, where was he? And—and—the gold was gone. And he had interfered to keep the Squire from winning it!—and taken his hand when he thanked him for thinking of Kate's comfort!

Hang the gold! He might have had it—all, if he wanted it. But to sneak off like a coyote, and rob his own pard!

But of course it wasn't the gold he was after. To be sure, that would come in handy, with— with— with a woman on his hands!

But then she had hung about his neck only that morning, before she would let him leave her. And how she had gazed into his eyes until the tears had dimmed her own.

"I reckon, now, she knowed all along as how she was goin' fur to break my heart; an' she didn't do it willin'! I reckon that's it. He over-persuaded her. An' women critters, they're soft an' easy talked over. But I 'lowed it was all fur love o' me—that strong she couldn't tell me. A man's a blamed fool, an' easy took in, when a purty woman strikes him whar he lives."

"Ef I'd only knowed! She could 'a' backed out before the knot was tied; an' then he could 'a' had her all fair an' above-board. It would 'a' come down rough on yer humble servant; but then—but then—not like this hyar!"

He did not speak these words. He did not have even the thoughts clearly. But something to such purpose drifted dimly and confusedly through his clouded brain. All night long he sat there in the darkness on the hearth, with his head against the back of the fire-place, and the silent tears rolling slowly down his cheeks.

So the boys found him in the morning, when a lot of them with pale faces and wrathful looks came there in a body.

"It's all right, boys," he said, in a wandering sort of way, as they gathered about him with earnest glances.

He struggled to his feet; but when he would have walked, he staggered, and Burt Younger caught him in his arms.

"Now, by the fiends!" cried Burt, while his eyes blazed, and the veins swelled on his forehead, "I'll have the heart o' that hellion fur this hyar!"

"I allowed as it would come, when he didn't show up at the weddin'," said Limpy Dick, with his cynical whine.

From the midst of the crowd, where he seemed to have shrunk into even less than his wonted compass, he peered at the broken man with a snake-like glitter in his eyes, and a hardly repressed quiver of his upper lip.

"It's all right, Burt; it's all right!" murmured Little Jingo, recovering himself. "You're a solid friend, you air!"

Seeing that the momentary dizziness had passed, Burt let go his hold, and whirling about, snatched the cripple off his feet, and hurled him headlong through the door!

CHAPTER XIX.

A NEW PHASE OF THE PLOT.

At the break of day Limpy Dick had made his appearance in so unusual a plight, as to at once set the whole camp agog.

He was covered with dust, as if with a long tramp on the highway; he was pale with excitement, and had his left arm bound with a bloody handkerchief.

"Gents!" he cried, to the gaping crowd that gathered about him, "I could 'a' told ye this hyar thing weeks ago. But, no! ye wouldn't hearken to me. You was all so sharp, ye knowed everythin' was all O. K. Waal, now mebbey you'll say as it was only growlin' at Little Jingo's weddin'!"

He stopped, panting for breath.

"What air you tryin' to git through you?" growled Burt Younger, with a savage scowl; "an' what's the matter with Little Jingo's weddin'?"

"Matter enough; I reckon you'll allow that before you're many hours older. Whar is the bride, I'd like you to tell me?"

"Whar she ought to be; at home, gittin' breakfast for her leetle man."

"Oh yes!—in yer eye!" sneered Limpy Dick. "It'll be a long time before she gits breakfast fur Little Jingo ag'in, my Christian friend!"

Burt Younger's rejoinder was too profane for quotation. He did not like Limpy Dick; and he was infuriated by his persistent slurring of Colorado Kate.

"Look hyar, hop-an-go-klunk!" he cried. "Spit out what you've got to say in short meter! But hark ye to one thing! Ef you say anythin' ag'in Colorado Kate what yer can't back with the facts—Waal, jest you go on! But I'm layin fur ye!"

"Mebbe you'll dispute this," blustered Limpy Dick, with his hands on his hips, and his head wagging from side to side defiantly. "She's run away with the Undertaker!"

So startling was this charge, that the men stood with mouths agape, staring stupidly at one another.

At last Burt Younger found breath to thunder out:

"What?"

"She's run away with the Undertaker," repeated Limpy Dick. "Ain't that plain enough fur ye? She's cut the ranch, sloped, got, ske-daddled, shook Little Jingo fur a man more to her likin'!"

Bellowing an oath of furious indignation, Younger leaped toward the cripple as if to shake the life out of him.

But Dick skipped nimbly out of reach, crying:

"Keep that buffaler bull off o' me, boys! Am I to be chewed up because the thing turns out as I knowed it would? I didn't make her the way she is. It is only that I see the thing that you was too thickheaded to see. I allow that ain't no crime. If you don't like the how it's panned out, jump onto the Undertaker."

"How do you know that she's run off with him?" demanded Burt.

"I was goin fur Twin Bluffs, yistiddy, an' jest as I got nigh the forks, I heard somebody tearin' along after me like the old feller himself was behind 'em. I stopped fur 'em to come up, an' thar it was the Undertaker an' Colorado Kate, on Little Jingo's best horses. She was a-takin' on, skeery an' cryin', an' he was a-chinnin' to her like he never chinned it sence he struck this hyar camp. Now you jest want to believe he knows how to wag his jaw when he wants to!"

"I'll bet he does!" cried one of the listeners, who was only too glad to believe anything to the discredit of the Undertaker.

"Waal, I spotted 'em at once," continued Limpy Dick, "before they pulled up, a-starin' at me as if they thought I'd come up through the ground. An' I see that his nibs was an ugly man to fool round jest about that time o' day! So I jumps fur the rocks like shinnin' up a greased pole."

"He come for me, a-yellin' for me to stop; but I jest kep' a-travelin' fur the table-rock what overhangs the road thar."

"Then he whanged away at me, an' thar's what he took out o' my hide."

At this point in his narrative Limpy Dick unwound the bloody handkerchief, and showed a flesh-wound in his arm.

"But I made the table-rock an' looked down at him in the road; an' he swore he'd plug me ef I didn't come down out o' that."

"I put my fingers to my nose, an' allow'd he'd better try his hand. Before he could draw a bead on me an' send one home, I could dodge out o' sight. An' ef he tried to foller me, I could lose him up thar among the crags an' brush, an' not half try. He knowed that."

"Then he come the honeyfugle dodge. What was I afear'd of? He was only foolin', fur to see ef he could skeer me."

"Waal, you bet I knowed all about that. So I asks him what was he doin' with another man's wife? That was what looked queer to me."

"He see it was no go; so he gits r'ily ag'in; an' he swears that he'll cut the heart out o' me one o' these days ef I give him away, an' bring Little Jingo an' the boys down on him."

"Then she ups an' says, in the way she has with her what you all know as well as I do, that she's had better men than Little Jingo before ever she see hide or hair of him, an' she's got a better one after him; an' it's nobody's business! An' she calls the Undertaker fur to come on, an' never mind such a leetle cuss as me."

"Then they pull out, taking the left fork. An' 'stid o' goin' on to Twin Bluffs, I put back fur Canyon City, an' hyar I be. Now, what air ye goin' to do about it?"

"I'm goin' fur Little Jingo's shanty!" declared Burt. "An' blast yer eyes! ef this hyar thing ain't so, I'll make mincemeat o' you!"

"That's yer privilege! Come on, boys! Hyar's fur Little Jingo's shanty. We'll see who's got the right o' this thing!"

And the crowd went, with the result narrated at the end of the last chapter.

The sight of Little Jingo left not a shadow of doubt in any one's mind.

Burt Younger was so enraged with it all, that he vented his anger on Limpy Dick, as we have seen.

"Blast ye!" he cried, "it's bad enough without your eternal croakin'!"

Then the boys would have formed a company to hunt the Undertaker to the death. But Little Jingo said No!

"This hyar's my funeral; an' I say that the man as lifts a finger ag'in' the Undertaker ur—ur—her!—will have to settle with me! Cheese it, boys! It's mighty good o' ye to want to see me righted; but I reckon I know what suits me best."

"But, do you propose to stand this?" cried Burt, in astonishment. "Ef it was me, I'd—I'd bolt him without grease!"

"But it ain't you; an' that makes the difference. I tell you, drop it!"

"Little Jingo—"

"It's my funeral, I tell ye; an' I propose to run it to my own notion. So now, git out o' this, all of ye. I don't want none o' you rats smellin' around my carcass."

The words were rough; but they were spoken with perfect gravity. In his pain, he wanted to be let alone.

The boys understood and respected his feeling, and so left him in peace.

Not staying to redress his injuries, Limpy Dick skulked off.

The boys thought nothing of this, and cared less. No one sympathized with him.

So it was nothing to them that he left the camp. They felt that he had come only to gratify his malice; and that accomplished, he was free to go about his business again.

But they were not indifferent to Little Jingo's wrongs. All the business of the camp stopped while they discussed them.

Burt Younger was the leader about whom the others gathered, eagerly listening to everything he said.

He freely expressed his resentment against the Undertaker, and even more bitterly against Colorado Kate.

"But it's t'other an' which between 'em," he added. "When a man's pard an' his wife shakes him, I allow it's playin' it mighty low down all round."

Then he growled his disgust at the way Little Jingo had shielded the offenders from the just vengeance of the community.

"He's always been too soft on that thar skeezicks. Jest look at the way he stood it when he cleaned him out o' the Ace o' Hearts!"

The day passed in this fruitless discussion; and just before nightfall, the arrival of the Overland coach was an event which promised to rouse the spirits of the crowd for a time.

But when it drew up before the hotel, and the first "pilgrim" to alight was the Squire, the boys frowned again. They had not forgiven him for "cleaning out" their favorite.

He turned and assisted a lady from the coach; and then the clouded faces lighted eagerly.

There was not a moment's doubt of one thing. All voted her the most refined and delicate woman that had ever visited the camp. What won the instant sympathy of all those rough fellows, was a look of sadness on her face.

She raised her veil, and scanned their faces eagerly, expectantly. But if she sought a familiar face among them she was evidently disappointed.

"He is not here," she said to the Squire.

"He lives up the gulch a piece," was the reply. "I'll send for him, without letting him know who it is, and have him here to see you directly."

"No," she objected. "Let us go to him. After what I caused him to suffer, it is little that I should be the one to seek a reconciliation."

The Squire bowed gravely, with the dropping of the eyes of one who puts a curb on rising indignation.

"I yield to your wish," he said. "I hope that he may prove worthy of your noble condescension."

He turned to Burt Younger, who had overheard what had passed between him and his companion.

"Is there a lady's saddle in the camp?" he asked.

"You'd orter know thar ain't, Cap," replied Burt, only too anxious to put the Squire under the appearance of insincerity. "No more is thar within a hundred mile o' hyar, like as not."

The Squire turned again to the lady, disdaining to notice Burt's manner.

"You see the impossibility of carrying out your wish," he said. "On the other hand, it will be no inconvenience for him to come to you."

"I can ride without a saddle, if I am given a gentle horse," persisted the lady.

"Can I get the use of such a horse?" asked the Squire.

"I allow the lady kin git almost any sort of a beast she wants," said Burt, with pointed emphasis. "But, look hyar, Cap. Is it Little Jingo you're wantin' to see?"

"No," said the Squire.

"Cause ef it is," persisted Burt, not heeding the Squire's denial, "he ain't in no shape fur to receive visitors at this stage o' the game."

He looked at the lady as he spoke, which accounted for his choice of words, and the marked politeness of his tone and manner. He always "laid himself out" when he addressed the sex.

"It is Mr. George Saunderson that we wish to see," she said, in soft, musical tones.

"The Undertaker?" cried Burt, with a start, turning toward the Squire.

"Yes," he replied, gravely.

Then to the lady he explained in a word that it was a nickname by which Saunderson was known in the camp.

But Burt's embarrassment was now too evident to pass unnoticed.

He scratched his head, then took the quid of tobacco from his mouth and threw it away, finishing by wiping his hand on his trousers. He hitched his weight uneasily to the other foot, and look about at his comrades, and then at the lady, in awkward distress.

"Ye ain't lookin' fur that—fur him, ma'am?" he asked, his manner, his voice, and his checking of the word that sprung to his lips, all combining to betray a strong feeling in the matter.

"Yes! Why not?" asked the lady, at once alarmed. "What has happened to him?"

It was plain that this was the quick anxiety of a woman for one she loved.

She went on, with almost a piteous cry:

"He is my husband! Do not keep me from him, gentlemen! Tell me at once!"

"Your husband!" cried Burt, staring at her blankly.

Then he recovered himself awkwardly, and went on hurriedly:

"Why, yes, of course. But—a—ma'am, I think with the Squire, that p'raps you'd better go in the hotel, while we send fur him. Ye see, ma'am, the hoss as I was a-thinkin' about has gone a mite lame, an' it 'u'd be resky to send you on her up the gulch without no saddle, bein's as you ain't used to ridin' that way."

But this was too plainly a prevarication.

The lady sprung to Burt's side and seized his arm.

"Oh, tell me!" she cried. "Something has happened to him! He has been hurt! He is sick!"

"I wish't he was, ma'am! I wish't to God he was!—an' dead, an' buried too, before he

got the chance to bring sorrer to the like o' you, ma'am!" cried honest Burt, with a sudden burst of feeling.

CHAPTER XX.

COLORADO KATE COMES BACK.

THE lady snatched her hands away from him, and sprung back.

"What?" she cried, in astonishment and wondering resentment.

"Thar ain't no use in tryin' to kiver the thing up," said Burt. "You've got to know it fu'st or last, an' mebbys as well fu'st as last. Hyar it is, ma'am; an' it's sorry I am to have it to say."

"What?—what?" cried the lady, breathlessly, finding the suspense intolerable.

"Thar's a man out yon," said Burt, shaking his hand in the direction of Little Jingo's shanty—"as white a man as ever trod in shoe-leather!—as has shut himself away from his friends like a wounded b'ar what has crep' into a holler log to die! Who done it? The Undertaker, cuss him! He was his pard, ye onderstand. Do ye know what a pard is? A feller pilgrim what a man ties to!—closer nor ary brother."

"But what is all this to me? I do not understand you!" cried the lady, in bewilderment.

"I wish't to God ye didn't have to onderstand it, ma'am!" averred Burt. "But you've come fur a galoot as sold out mighty cheap, a-swoppin' Colorado Kate fur the like o' you! Colorado Kate was Little Jingo's wife, ye onderstand. They make a dog-gone sweet pair—his pard an' his wife!"

"But, you don't mean to say—"

"I do mean to say jest that, ma'am! More sorrow to me to have to sp'ile yer ears with it."

The lady stood aghast, looking from one to another as if for some one to contradict this charge.

Now the Squire interposed.

"What is this?" he cried. "Do you accuse George Saunderson of having run away with another man's wife, and that man his partner?"

"You heard me, boss!" answered Burt.

"But when?"

"Yistiddy"

"Yesterday!"

"More than that," pursued Burt, as if to blunt the pain of the wound he had been forced to inflict on the lady, "he pulled his pard's cache, an' made off with the rocks!"

"Robbed him?" cried the Squire.

"He left the shanty!" said Burt, as if to emphasize the greed that had left nothing else.

The Squire turned to the lady with a peculiar look in his eyes.

"What did I tell you?" he asked. "First and last, it is the money he is after. You ought to thank God for your narrow escape."

"Don't! don't!" she cried, almost fiercely.

With headlong haste she turned back to the stage door, pausing with her foot on the step and her hands grasping either jamb.

"Can this stage go back immediately?" she asked, in a choking voice. "Are there fresh horses?"

The driver had stood with his mouth agape, drinking in the scene. He now answered:

"The hearse goes on in the mornin', ma'am."

"But I wish to go back!—and at once!" cried the lady, impatiently.

Then addressing the Squire:

"Charter the coach—if necessary, buy it! Buy fresh horses! I cannot breathe the air of this place. Take me away!—take me away!"

The last was a hysterical cry. She fell to catching her breath and sobbing, as if her heart were breaking.

Burt Younger clinched his hands and swore below his breath.

"Little Jingo or no Little Jingo," he muttered, "I'll lay him out fur this!"

And in that crowd he could have found a company that would follow him to a man.

The Squire did not seek to dissuade Mrs. Saunderson from her purpose of at once leaving the spot of her bitter disappointment. His heart swelled with a chuckle at his success.

"Now a divorce! In a few months, or even a few weeks—why not?—a new marriage! Then wealth, and Europe!"

He assisted her into the coach, saying to the crowd as much as to the driver:

"I reckon this is all right. It's money the company's after, whichever way the coach runs. And then, as you don't start until morning, you can have it back here in time."

Then to Burt:

"If you will let the lady have the use of the best horses in the camp, you can charge your own price for them."

"She's welcome to the best we've got, an' no charge to her."

Mrs. Saunderson had fallen back in the coach, burying her face in her handkerchief.

Burt Younger gave directions to the boys, and they set about obeying them with a will.

In the bustle of changing horses, no one heard the rapid approach of a rider who came at full gallop.

The Squire was the first to catch sight of the new-comer, and the effect on him was startling.

His jaw dropped, and into his eyes came the wild look of a hunted beast.

"What shall I do?" he gasped. "Kill her?"

And he plucked a revolver from his belt.

But then he saw the madness of that act. It would only be exchanging one dilemma for another even more hopeless.

"It's all up!" he cried to himself, following up the abandonment of hope with a bitter curse.

Then came the thought of flight. His life was all he could hope to save from the wreck of his schemes. He sprang toward a horse standing near by, with his bridle thrown over a post.

A clear, ringing voice cried:

"Stop that man! He is a murderer! a liar! a thief! everything that is vilest! Stop him!"

In amazement at the sound of that voice, which all instantly recognized, the boys whirled round, to stare at the approaching rider.

It was a woman with her hair streaming out behind her with the speed at which she came.

Her horse's eyes were ablaze, his nostrils blood-red, his lips and breast flecked with foam.

She was seated astride, with her feet tied beneath the animal's belly, and her hands bound at her back.

A cry went up from the crowd.

"Colorado Kate!"

"Stop him! stop him!" she shouted again.

Then the boys saw that the Squire was mounted and spurring away for dear life!

He rode directly toward Colorado Kate, and as he met her, drew his revolver and fired.

The girl threw her body to one side, and by a pressure of her knee caused her horse to swerve in the same direction.

In that posture she shot by the Squire.

He turned in the saddle, and fired at her again, with as poor success as before.

Burt Younger did not understand it; but he saw that there was something under the surface.

No one but a knave detected in his guilt would take so desperate a step as the Squire had.

What then was the meaning of Kate's return to the camp in this predicament? She did not look like a run-away wife. She was bound—a captive!

With his head in a whirl, Burt Younger cried:

"After him, boys!"

They responded with a united yell. There was no quarry they would hunt more willingly than this fellow, who, besides "cleaning out" Little Jingo, had "slung so much style" that they all disliked him. So they bounded after him, firing their revolvers as they ran.

Burt ran forward, caught Kate's horse by the bridle, and threw him back on his haunches.

"Oh, Burt!" cried the girl, "don't let him escape! It's the worst plot you ever heard of! Did Charley believe that I had run away from him?"

"No!" shouted Burt, with an oath, telling a lie for which he could never afterward be brought to say that he was sorry.

With a slash of his bowie, he cut the rope that bound Kate's feet, and lifted her from the horse's back.

At a bound he was in her place, and wheeling the animal short round, gave chase to the fleeing Squire.

Mrs. Saunderson had come forth from the coach, amazed at the strange turn matters had taken.

She looked for the woman whose strange arrival had set all commotion going.

She heard her scream:

"Charley!"

She saw her rush forward and throw herself headlong into the arms of a man who was just entering the camp from the other direction.

She thought she had never seen so woe-begone a face as his—so ghastly and haggard; such sad eyes; so bowed a figure. He seemed old, with the age of profound grief.

But at sight of the woman with streaming hair, his figure had straightened up as if touched by a magic wand.

He received the woman on his breast and wound his arm about her as if he would crush her into his heart, and kept repeating over and over again:

"Kate! Kate! Kate! Kate!"

But into the camp dashed another rider—this time a man—who claimed instant attention.

"Don't ask no questions!" he shouted. "but

follier me! Let the Squire go! You can't touch one side of him with that jaded hoss! Git fresh stock, and come with me! If you want to save the Undertaker's life, come!—an' come like—"

The last word was lost in the hubbub; but the boys had gathered the sense of it.

Want to save the life of the Undertaker? Well, now, you may believe they did! All of a sudden every last man of them was ready to lay down his life for him!

Then there was a rush to stables. Saddles were scorned. Every one mounted the first thing he could lay his hands on.

Then a wild snorting and excited whinnying, a whisking of tails, a flying of heels, and away!

But there!—we have almost forgotten to say that the man in advance was Andy—Andy, the ex-road-agent! Andy, whom Limpy Dick had pushed over the cliff! Andy, who had lain hidden in the shed, and overheard the plot formed between his would-be murderer and the man who was indirectly the cause of his having to fly the retreat for his life; and who had there sworn to be even with them all.

He was now keeping his oath!

CHAPTER XXI.

ALL HANDS ROUND!

WHAT Andy had done so far in fulfillment of his determination to "get square" with the Squire and Limpy Dick, the reader shall know presently. Let us now follow him at the head of the men of Canyon City, on their way to succor the Undertaker.

The boys saw that, as Colorado Kate had ridden one of Little Jingo's horses, so was Andy mounted on the other; and this was a guarantee of some connection with her, and therefore hostility toward her enemies.

Andy led the rescuers directly to Big-fisted Frank's mountain retreat.

He did not attempt to surprise the sentinel, since, with such a rout at his back, that would be almost impossible, forced as they were to do whatever they proposed to do before the escaped Squire could communicate with the road-agent chief.

Charging headlong through the defile, they met with no opposition, the sentinel knowing that, with no one at his back, his single arm could avail nothing. He therefore "lay low, and looked out for number one."

They found the retreat with no one at home, but the Undertaker a prisoner bound.

"And now, gentlemen," said Andy, "the quicker we git out o' this, the more whole skins we'll be likely to take back to Canyon City! Ef Big-fisted Frank should happen to find out that we had stolen a march on him, he might give us a brush yit!"

Back to Canyon City they rode like the wind; but before they reached it they were arrested by a startling spectacle.

It was the dead body of a man dangling from the limb of a tree by the neck, in a moonlit glade through which the road passed.

"Why, it's Limpy Dick!" cried Burt Younger.

"It's him, fur a fact!" admitted Andy, complacently.

"Is this your work?" asked Burt.

"Not much!" replied Andy. "I wish it was!"

"What's this hyer?" asked one of the men.

"A paper tacked onto his breast."

Burt took it off, and examined it in the moonlight.

On it was traced:

"This is Cal Vrooman's way of squaring accounts with a man who was fool enough to let his game slip through his fingers, and spoil a dead-sure thing. Leave this rope; as I may have further use for it before this thing is played out."

Andy chuckled softly to himself as he listened.

"An' who in Cain is Cal Vrooman?" asked Burt.

"The Squire," said Andy. "He's feelin' bad about it, ain't he?"

"What shall we do about this carcass?"

"Shove it under ground, I say."

"An' leave the rope whar it is?"

"Yes—to hang the Squire on, ef you ketch him!"

This suggestion tickled the boys' fancy; so they indorsed it to a man.

"He's had dog's luck, from fu'st to last," said Burt, as they took the body of the cripple down.

"That's so," admitted Andy, taking the thing quite philosophically, however. "I allow he was born whinin'; he's been growlin' all his life; an' he died a dog's death, as a finisher."

The burial was a hasty one, only sufficient to secure the body from the coyotes.

Then they rode on to Canyon City.

With his wonted reserve, the Undertaker had

asked no questions, nor volunteered any explanation of his own share in what had occurred.

He was equally dumb when, riding into the camp, they found an immense bonfire burning, in the light of which stood Little Jingo and his wife, whose happy faces showed that they had come to a perfect understanding; and beside them the lady whom the Squire had brought thither.

She bent forward to scan them with an eager look on her pale face; and when the Undertaker drew up with the rest, and sat staring at her with a strange, troubled look, she advanced to the side of his horse with her hands clasped on her breast, and asked, piteously:

"George, can you forgive me?"

He did not answer; but his lips trembled, and his breast labored, as he still gazed fixedly down upon her.

She took his hand and drew it to her lips, while all the spectators stood staring breathlessly, wondering what was to come of it all.

The Undertaker did not repel her. He let her press her cheek upon his hand, and bathe it with her tears; but yet he did not speak.

However, this was more than Little Jingo could stand.

"Look hyar, pard," he said. "That ain't the way to settle that sort o' thing. Thar's the old shanty in good shape yit. Jest you take her down thar, and show us a happier woman in the mornin' an' don't furgit to shorten up yer own mug some."

Without more ado, he lifted the pleading wife and set her before her husband, on his horse's withers.

Mechanically the Undertaker yielded her the support of his arm, still with locked lips and that deeply-troubled look.

She let her head sink against his shoulder, and so rested with closed eyes.

"Now, git along!" said Little Jingo, slapping the horse on the rump.

And the long-separated pair went thus to the shanty Little Jingo and his Queer Pard had occupied before his marriage.

Then Little Jingo explained to a curious audience how the Undertaker and Colorado Kate had been carried off by Big-fisted Frank and his men, Limpy Dick lingering behind to effect the robbery on his own account.

At this point Andy took up the narrative, seeing that from thence on he had been one of the principal actors.

He told why he had arrayed himself against the plotters; how he had ambushed Limpy Dick and his captive, and by assaulting the former had given Colorado Kate her opportunity to escape; and the rest the reader already knows.

The boys voted what he had done an ample squaring of his account as a road-agent; and Little Jingo rewarded him substantially.

The Undertaker obeyed his pard's injunction, and on the morrow showed them a happier looking woman than he had taken from their midst; besides that, he was a changed man himself.

A clean shave and a hair-cut at the hands of a certain deft Chinaman, and a suit of the best clothes the camp afforded, made him look twenty years younger.

It had been a misunderstanding between him and his wife, effected by the scheming Squire; but now all was happily made right.

As Mayor of Canyon City, Little Jingo declared that day a legal holiday, which was to be celebrated at his expense as a "grand united blow-out," in honor of the reunion of himself and wife, and his pard and wife.

"An' now, pard," he said, when the music struck up, "we're goin' to make a clean sweep o' this thing. No more hangin' in the doldrums. Take that leetle woman o' yours an' open the ball with her."

"Suppose you lead off with my wife; and I will see how well I can follow with Mrs. Lowden," suggested the Undertaker.

"Done!" cried Little Jingo.

And the steps he took in that famous dance with his pard's beautiful wife are the boast of Canyon City to this day!

Every one had thought that the runaway was a "dead-sure thing," the Squire had thought that the success of his plot was "a dead-sure thing," Limpy Dick had thought that he had "a dead-sure thing," but, notwithstanding these repeated illustrations of the wisdom of the proverb, that "There's nothing so uncertain as a dead-sure thing," the boys all swear that Little Jingo and his Queer Pard and their two wives are "the happiest four-in-hand that ever run in matrimonial harness; an' that is a dead-sure thing, an' no mistake about it!"

THE END.

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